

Too Exhausted to Stay? Emotional Labour and Turnover Intentions of Hotel Frontline Employees

Chuxin Zhong, Conghui Su
Jinan University, Jinan 518053, China.

Abstract: In the service industry, frontline hotel employees are a typical group that are required to retain customers with emotional labour. Using resource retention theory as the theoretical foundation, this paper focuses on the hospitality industry and proposes a mediating effect model of emotional labour-emotional exhaustion-employee turnover intention and a moderating effect model with organizational support as the moderating variable. Emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role in the relationship between surface-level play and turnover intentions, and perceived organizational support plays a moderating role in the relationship between emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions, which provides practical guidance for hotel companies in managing their employees.

Keywords: Frontline Hotel Employees; Emotional Labour; Turnover Intentions; Emotional Exhaustion; Perceived Organizational Support

1. Introduction

High staff turnover has been a huge challenge for China's hospitality industry, with nearly half of hotels in china experiencing a 15% staff turnover rate in 2019^[1]. Compared to employees in other industries, hotel frontline staff have more emotional and direct interactions with customers , which requires more emotional labour from staff to retain customers^[2]. Employee turnover will have many adverse effects on the hospitality industry, which is a labour-intensive enterprise. Few study had focused on the relationship between emotional labour and turnover intentions of frontline employees in the hospitality industry. Therefore, this study will explore the relationship between two dimensions of frontline employees' emotional labour and turnover intentions in the hospitality industry based on resource conservation theory, and introduce emotional exhaustion and perceived organizational support to further explore the mechanism of the influence of emotional labour and employees' turnover intentions, as well as provide useful suggestions for China's hotels to effectively improve employees' emotional state and reduce turnover rates in practice.

2. Literature review

2.1 Emotional labor and turnover intentions

Emotional labor was first proposed by Hochschild, who believed that emotional labor is carried out to achieve certain organizational goals. Individuals manage their own emotions in order to meet customer expectations^[3]. This corresponds to the job nature of frontline employees in hotels. Emotional labor strategies refer to the methods that employees use to express emotions that meet organizational requirements. Scholars have different classifications of the emotional labor strategies involved. Hochschild proposed two emotional labor strategies, surface acting and deep acting^[3]. Surface acting refers to individuals suppressing their own private emotions and only adjusting the external expression of emotions to meet organizational requirements, while the latter refers to individuals trying to adjust their negative emotional feelings internally and perform job emotions that meet organizational rules in their work. Diefendorff further proposed that emotional labor includes three dimensions: surface acting, deep acting, and natural expression. Natural expression refers to employees expressing the emotions they actually and naturally feel^[4]. In this study, considering the

universality of emotional labor strategies in the hotel environment ^[5], we only measured deep acting and surface acting in the Diefendorff study. This paper will separately discuss the effects of the two emotional labor strategies on the outcome variables.

Mobley proposed the concept of turnover intention, which refers to the idea of an employee being dissatisfied with their job and seeking to find a new one, ultimately planning to leave their current organization^[6]. Actual turnover behavior means that the employee has terminated their employment relationship with the organization, while turnover intention is considered the final psychological stage before the employee decides to leave the current organization^[7]. Therefore, for the organization, paying attention to employees' turnover intentions is more practically meaningful than focusing on actual turnover behavior.

According to Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory, individuals have a motivation to protect their emotional resources from harm, including protecting existing emotional resources and compensating for depleted emotional resources from multiple sources^[8]. When employees use surface acting strategies, their internal emotional feelings conflict with their external emotional expressions, resulting in a loss of emotional resources, which leads to negative outcomes such as emotional dissonance^[9]. Long-term and sustained suppression prompts employees to withdraw and seek reasons to leave. When using deep acting and natural expression strategies, employees' inner emotions are consistent with the performance rules required by the organization, which does not consume more psychological and emotional resources^[10]. This will significantly reduce employees' turnover intention.

Based on the above discussion, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: Surface acting significantly positively affects employees' turnover intention in frontline hotel employees;

H1b: Deep acting significantly negatively affects employees' turnover intention in frontline hotel employees.

2.2 Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion can be understood as the depletion or exhaustion of emotional resources, which refers to the feeling of emotional and physical exhaustion and depletion that employees experience when they expend a large amount of emotional resources at work^[11]. According to Hochschild's research, employees who deal with customers often need to exert a lot of effort to adjust their behavior and performance. This emotional inconsistency and suppression can make employees feel nervous, anxious, and even irritable. Over time, employees gradually feel a sense of unreality and loss of self, which exacerbates the loss of emotional resources and ultimately leads to emotional exhaustion^[3]. Employees in the hospitality industry are one of the groups who express emotions relatively frequently, and emotional exhaustion is also commonly found among them. Previous studies have validated the view that surface acting significantly increases employee emotional exhaustion. However, employees who use deep acting strategies can naturally express positive and appropriate emotions, and employees can gain personal pleasure and a sense of achievement from serving others, compensating for the depletion of emotional resources and thus reducing emotional exhaustion^[12]. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2a: Surface acting (SA) has a significant positive predictive effect on employee emotional exhaustion (EE) ;

H2b: Deep acting (DA) has a significant negative predictive effect on employee emotional exhaustion (EE) .

Emotional labor inevitably consumes employees' emotional resources. According to the resource conservation theory, When employees feel that their emotional resources are about to be depleted, they will exhibit a series of negative work attitudes and behaviors, and over time, they may develop thoughts of quitting^[13]. Based on the above analysis, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3a: Emotional exhaustion (EE) acts a mediating role between surface acting (SA) and employees' turnover intention (TI).

H3b: Emotional exhaustion (EE) acts a mediating role between deep acting (DA) and employees' turnover intention (TI).

2.3 Perceived Organizational Support

The concept of perceived organizational support was first proposed by Eisenberger, which refers to employees' subjective perception of whether their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being^[14]. Perceived organizational support is an important external resource for individuals and a way for employees to seek emotional compensation during emotional labor^[15]. Studies have shown that perceived organizational support can significantly reduce the accumulation of negative emotions among employees, minimize the gap between employees' true emotions and their positive emotions towards customer service requirements ^[16]. Based on the above analysis, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4: Perceived organizational support (POS) moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion (EE) and employees' turnover intention (TI).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and procedure

This study focuses on full-time frontline employees in domestic hotels, and employs both online questionnaire and on-site investigation methods to distribute 250 survey questionnaires, out of which 220 were collected. After careful screening, 12 invalid questionnaires were excluded, resulting in 208 valid questionnaires with an effective response rate of 83.2%. Among the respondents, females accounted for 67.8% and males accounted for 32.2%. Moreover, 55.7% of the respondents were between the ages of 26 and 30, indicating that the majority of frontline employees in hotels are young workers. In addition, 37.5% of the respondents had worked for less than a year, while 30.2% had worked for 1 to 3 years, indicating that the surveyed group mainly consisted of new employees and those with relatively short work experience, which to a certain extent reflects the high staff turnover rate in the hospitality industry.

3.2 Measures

To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, this study referred to and adopted mature scales from classic domestic and foreign research, using a five-point Likert scoring method. This study drew on the 11 measurement items related to surface acting and deep acting from Diefendorff's emotional labor strategy scale^[4]. Scholars have used this scale to study Chinese hotel employees and found that the scale has high reliability and validity in the Chinese region, with alpha coefficients of 0.88 and 0.82 for surface acting and deep acting, respectively^[5]. For emotional exhaustion, this study used the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)^[17], which is the most widely used burnout scale with 22 items and an alpha coefficient of 0.76. Among these items, nine focus on emotional exhaustion, and this study appropriately revised the scale based on these nine items. To measure employee turnover intention, this study referred to Mobley's Turnover Intention Scale^[7], which has four items and an alpha coefficient of 0.79. Organizational support was measured using Eisenberger's eight-item scale as a moderating variable^[6], with an alpha coefficient of 0.90. This study treated demographic variables such as gender, age, education level, and work experience of the respondents as control variables.

4. Result

4.1 Correlation analysis

This paper employed SPSS 26 to process and analyze the data, firstly calculating the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient of the research variables. Surface acting was significantly and positively correlated with employees' turnover intention ($\beta=0.257$, $P < 0.01$) and emotional exhaustion ($\beta=0.265$, $P < 0.01$). Deep acting was significantly and positively correlated with employees' perceived organizational support ($\beta=0.305$, $P < 0.01$), and significantly and negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($\beta=-0.211$, $P < 0.01$). Employees' turnover intention was significantly and negatively correlated with perceived organizational support ($\beta=-0.250$, $P < 0.01$), and significantly and positively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($\beta=0.298$, $P < 0.01$). Perceived organizational support was significantly and negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($\beta=-0.269$, $P < 0.01$), which provides preliminary evidence for subsequent hypothesis testing. In addition, the correlation coefficient between deep acting and employees' turnover intention ($\beta=-0.052$, $P > 0.05$) did not reach a significant level, so hypothesis 1b was not validated. Therefore, emotional exhaustion cannot serve as a mediator between the relationship between deep acting and employees' turnover intention, and hypothesis 3b was not supported by the data.

4.2 Mediating effect analysis

As Hypothesis 3b was not supported, this section only has to examine the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion between surface acting and employees' intention to quit. Hierarchical regression models were used to test Hypotheses 1 to 4.

Table 1 shows that in Model 1, surface acting significantly and positively predicted emotional exhaustion with a regression coefficient of $\beta=0.267$ ($P<0.001$), which confirms Hypothesis 2a. In Model 2, emotional exhaustion significantly and positively predicted employees' intention to quit with a regression coefficient of $\beta=0.305$ ($P<0.001$). Both procedures of mediation test were met. In Model 3, the regression results of the first step showed that surface acting significantly and positively influenced employees'

intention to quit with a regression coefficient of $\beta=0.260$ ($P<0.001$), which supports Hypothesis 1a. The second step regression showed that even after controlling for emotional exhaustion, the predictive effect of surface acting on employees' intention to quit remained significant, but the regression coefficient decreased from $\beta=0.260$ ($P<0.001$) to $\beta=0.188$ ($P<0.01$), indicating that emotional exhaustion partially mediated the relationship between surface acting and employees' intention to quit, which supports Hypothesis 3a. In addition, in the regression model with emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable and deep acting as the independent variable, the regression coefficient of deep acting on employees' emotional exhaustion was $\beta=-0.229$ ($P<0.001$), indicating that deep acting significantly and negatively predicted employees' emotional exhaustion, thus supporting Hypothesis 2b.

Table 1: Mediating effect analysis

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	
	EE	TI	First	Second
SA	0.267***		0.260***	
EE		0.305***		
SA				0.188**
EE				0.250***
R ²	0.067	0.089	0.060	0.122
F	15.345***	21.987***	15.076***	15.003***

4.3 Moderating effect analysis

This part aims to examine whether organizational support enhances or attenuates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and employee turnover intention. Controlling for demographic variables, the interaction term of emotional exhaustion and organizational support significantly predicted employee turnover intention ($\beta=0.126$, $P<0.05$), and the model fit was significantly improved ($\Delta R^2=0.015$, $P<0.05$), confirming Hypothesis 4.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study, based on the theory of conservation of resources, focuses on the hospitality industry. The results indicate that the two forms of emotional labor have different effects on employees' turnover intention. Surface acting has a positive effect, while deep acting has a negative effect. Emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role between surface acting and turnover intention, indicating that if employees adopt surface acting, emotional resources will be depleted, leading to emotional exhaustion. Organizational support has a moderating effect on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and employees' turnover intention, indicating that if employees receive organizational support when they experience emotional exhaustion, the depletion of their emotional resources will be compensated to some extent.

We shift the focus from the service industry to frontline hotel employees, helping domestic hotels to strengthen employee management and reduce personnel turnover. We suggested that hotels should take various measures to strengthen their intervention in employee emotional labor, such as creating a harmonious working atmosphere and arranging humane working hours for employees who clearly show characteristics of emotional exhaustion.

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