

# Emotional Labour and Burnout: A Systematic Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

Emotional labour, self-regulation of emotional displays to conform to work demands, is now an essential aspect of service careers. As work organisations increasingly expect emotional commitment from workers, the psychological costs, most notably burnout, have been a subject of interest among scholars. This systematic review of literature compiled between 2020 and 2025 synthesises studies to assess the interconnection between emotional labour and burnout in various occupational fields. With Scopus, 420 peer-reviewed articles were identified based on the PRISMA guidelines. The findings show that surface acting has a high correlation with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, whereas deep acting is related to more healthy outcomes but potentially still makes long-term psychological demands. The review also discusses contextual moderators including organizational support, emotional intelligence, autonomy of the job, and cultural expectations. Sectoral differences within healthcare, education, hospitality, and customer service highlight the complex effects of emotional labour. The results identify key intervention points, ranging from training in emotional regulation to policy change within organizations, with the objective of safeguarding worker well-being. The research adds to theoretical and practical knowledge and suggests avenues for future investigation into emotional labour and occupational health.

**Keywords:** Emotional Labour, Burnout, Surface Acting, Deep Acting, Occupational Stress, Systematic Review

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary work environment, especially in the service industry, emphasizes more and more the enactment of emotion as a workplace requirement. Emotional labour, which Hochschild (1983) originally proposed, refers to the management of feeling to meet organizational requirements when engaging in face-to-face interactions. Workers are required not only to do work but also to control how they feel and present those feelings while communicating with customers, patients, or students. As emotional labour improves organizational effectiveness and customer satisfaction, however, it inflicts significant psychological burdens on staff, causing conditions like burnout (Grandey, 2000).

Burnout, Maslach and Jackson (1981) suggest, includes the dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment reduced. It is common in emotionally labor-intensive professions, such as hospitality, teaching, nursing, and customer service. Recent empirical studies increasingly examine ways in which strategies of emotional regulation—particularly surface and deep acting—contribute to burnout. Surface acting, or the act of pretending emotions, is generally energy-draining and linked to increased levels of burnout (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). Deep acting, with efforts made to reconcile experienced emotions and necessary displays, is likely less harmful but still requires emotional effort.

In the post-pandemic world, with increased emotional demands and changes in workplace dynamics, it is more critical than ever to understand emotional labour's role in burnout. The rise of virtual workspaces, customer expectations, and employee mental health crises call for a modern synthesis of research. This paper systematically examines literature from 2020 to 2025, utilizing Scopus to determine empirical trends, theoretical developments, and practical knowledge on emotional labour and burnout.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional labour has been extensively studied in the last decades, with enormous advancements in the knowledge of its dimensions, consequences, and moderators. Hochschild's (1983) pioneering work characterized emotional labour as a process by which employees regulate their feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily expression. Grandey (2000) built on this by combining emotional labour with the stress-strain approach, positing that emotional labour, specifically surface acting, is a stressor with potential strain consequences such as burnout. The two major techniques of emotional labour are surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves pretending or masking emotions, whereas deep acting involves attempting to see the emotions one is required to show. Several studies attest that surface acting is positively linked with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, core facets of burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Hülsheger & Schewe, Ishii, K., & Markman, K. (2019), 2011, Hong et al., 2023), more autonomy at work associates with lower levels of emotional exhaustion (Farfán et al. 2020). Deep acting, though originally adaptive, can also lead to long-term weariness as a

result of prolonged emotional regulation. Researchers have discovered evidence that application of DA as an EL strategy may be advantageous for the employees (Geng et al., 2014; Grandey, 2015; Hur et al., 2015; Anaza et al., 2016; Yoo, 2016). Recent research highlights the organisational and individual-level moderators of the influence of emotional labour on burnout. For example, emotional intelligence, perceived organisational support, autonomy, and mindfulness have been found to act as buffers that counteract the ill effects of surface acting (Yin et al., 2023; Çakar et al., 2022; Kim & Han, 2022).

Sectoral differences have also been examined. In the field of healthcare, emotional labour is essential for patients but tends to result in huge burnout cases among nurses and doctors (Wang et al., 2021), robust association with hospitality employees' turnover intention (Park, Jeongdoo & Min, Hyounae. (2020)). Teachers use emotional labour to deal with classroom management and student conduct in education, adding to stress and burnout in the absence of support from the institution (Kariou et al., 2021). The customer service and hospitality industries, in which workers are required to show positive emotions at all times, have high turnover and dissatisfaction associated with emotional dissonance (Amissah et al., 2022).

Cultural research indicates that display rules and expectations of emotions differ across cultures, which in turn affect how emotional labour impacts workers. Collectivist cultures can promote conformity to display rules, rendering emotional labour less alienating, while individualist cultures can heighten emotional dissonance (Yin et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding the increasing body of literature, gaps exist in comprehending the long-term psychological impact of deep acting, the intersection of digital emotional labour in telework, and the influence of emerging technologies such as AI in mediating emotional demands. These gaps need to be addressed and are the basis for this systematic review.

### **3. RESEARCH GAP**

Emotional labour has been widely researched, yet some critical gaps exist:

- Inadequate comprehension of long-term implications of deep acting on mental health.
- Inadequately explored impact of digital emotional labour in post-pandemic remote workplaces.
- Shortage of comparative cross-cultural analyses within emotional labour research.
- Limited integration of AI and technology-mediated emotional labour frameworks.

These areas emphasize the necessity of a systematic synthesis of recent literature, especially between 2020 and 2025, to inform theoretical development and organizational practice.

### **4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

- To investigate the interrelation between emotional labour strategies (surface and deep acting) and burnout.
- To investigate the moderator and mediator variables influencing this relation.
- To measure sector-specific effects of emotional labour on burnout.
- To establish new trends and suggest avenues for future studies.

### **5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The systematic literature review conforms to the PRISMA guidelines. Scopus was chosen because it has broad indexing of peer-reviewed publications.

#### **5.1 Research Design**

- Type: Systematic literature review
- Data Source: Scopus database
- Period: January 2020 – March 2025
- Keywords: "emotional labour", "emotional labor", "burnout", "surface acting", "deep acting", "emotional exhaustion", "occupational stress"

#### **5.2 Inclusion Criteria**

- Empirical, peer-reviewed articles
- Published between 2020–2025
- Emphasis on emotional labour and burnout
- English language

Initial search yielded 3,280 articles. After removing duplicates (n = 480) and screening titles/abstracts (n = 2,150 excluded), 650 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Of these, 230 did not meet inclusion criteria, resulting in 420 articles included in the final synthesis.

### **5.3 Analysis Method**

A thematic synthesis method was employed. Articles were coded based on emotional labour strategies, burnout dimensions, occupational sector, moderating/mediating variables, and study outcomes. Objective-wise clusters were created for comparative analysis.

## **6. ANALYSIS**

This section offers an in-depth thematic synthesis of 420 peer-reviewed articles from 2020 to 2025 that investigated the dynamic relationship between emotional labour and burnout across various sectors. The examination is structured on five fundamental dimensions: emotional labour strategies, burnout consequences, sector differences, moderating/mediating variables, and new digital and cross-cultural findings.

### **6.1 Emotional Labour Strategies and Burnout Outcomes**

The two most common emotional regulation approaches—surface acting and deep acting—appear as reliable burnout predictors with varying intensity and consequences.

#### **6.1.1 Surface Acting and Burnout**

Surface acting, or the hiding or even faking of emotional displays, was the most common method of emotional labour studied (occurring in 87% of articles reviewed). It was always associated with increased emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, the two central burnout dimensions. In service professions such as customer service, call centres, and hospitality, surface acting resulted in a substantial drain on psychological resources (Çakar et al., 2022).

In particular, research within the healthcare field (Wang et al., 2021) found that nurses who more often practice surface acting are also more likely to experience compassion fatigue and emotional detachment, which are detrimental to patient outcomes. Educators who used surface acting in their teaching practices also experienced reduced job satisfaction and increased absenteeism (Kariou et al., 2021).

#### **6.1.2 Deep Acting and Adaptive Outcomes**

Deep acting—where people change their inner emotional state in order to actually feel the emotions required to express—was overall tied to more adaptive results. Though it was related to increased job involvement, personal achievement, and customer satisfaction, it came at a price. A number of longitudinal research (Yin et al., 2023) illustrated that chronic deep acting, without sufficient recovery or emotional support, resulted in long-term emotional exhaustion.

The two-sidedness of deep acting points out that although it can postpone burnout relative to surface acting, it does not eradicate the psychological cost of emotional regulation entirely.

### **6.2 Sectoral Variations**

Varying occupational sectors exhibited varying exposure and susceptibility to burnout caused by emotional labour.

#### **6.2.1 Healthcare Sector**

Healthcare workers, especially nurses and frontline workers, experienced the greatest emotional exhaustion. The need to remain composed and empathetic, even in the presence of trauma or patient aggression, imposed tremendous emotional dissonance. Wang et al. (2021) and Kim & Han (2022) found through their studies that ICU and oncology nurses who practiced surface acting had almost 50% greater burnout levels compared to those who practiced deep acting and received organizational support.

#### **6.2.2 Education Sector**

Teachers in early childhood and special education most often reported role ambiguity and emotional display requirements causing burnout. Emotional suppression was used to handle classroom behavior, deal with parents, and meet administrative expectations at the cost of high emotional exhaustion and low personal accomplishment (Kariou et al., 2021). Institutional culture and principal leadership styles moderated these effects significantly.

#### **6.2.3 Hospitality and Tourism**

Hospitality workers are often asked to "put on a smile" irrespective of their true emotional state. The study discovered that strict emotional display rules, alongside low job autonomy and high frequency of customer contact, increased risk of burnout. Amissah et al. (2022) determined that surface acting was the highest predictor of turnover intention among hotel front desk employees.

#### **6.2.4 Customer Service and Call Centers**

Call center representatives stand at the crossroads of performance measurement and emotional labour. Voice anonymity commonly requires the use of exaggerated optimism, resulting in emotional dissonance. Research indicated that emotional labour in the industry is exacerbated by monitoring work and absence of feedback, which culminates in high depersonalization and emotional exhaustion (Çakar et al., 2022).

### **6.3 Moderators and Mediators of Emotional Labour-Burnout Relationship**

#### **6.3.1 Emotional Intelligence (EI)**

EI became a powerful individual-level buffer. Individuals with high EI had stronger emotion regulation strategies that enabled them to buffer the detrimental effects of surface acting. Yin et al. (2023) and Kim & Han (2022) discovered that high-EI employees practiced more deep acting and less emotional exhaustion, even in highly stressful jobs.

#### **6.3.2 Perceived Organizational Support (POS)**

Organizational culture that acknowledges emotional effort and provides support mechanisms—such as counseling, emotional regulation training, or flexible scheduling—was found to reduce burnout. POS also enhances the perception of job meaningfulness, especially among service workers, and encourages constructive coping strategies.

#### **6.3.3 Job Autonomy and Control**

Autonomy in task performance and emotional display was found to buffer against burnout. Employees who could tailor their emotional expression style to situational needs, rather than follow scripted interactions, reported higher satisfaction and lower emotional exhaustion (Kim & Han, 2022).

#### **6.3.4 Mindfulness and Psychological Capital**

Mindfulness training and strong psychological capital (hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism) mediated the association between deep acting and burnout. Workers who received mindfulness training had lower stress reactivity and improved recovery from emotional regulation demands.

### **6.4 Emotional Labour in Remote and Hybrid Work Settings**

The post-pandemic workplace added a new dimension: digital emotional labour. Video calls, remote communication, and chat-based service provision demand ongoing emotional investment, if in a less physically present way. The need to project a "virtual presence," frequently through visual signals like smiling or nodding on camera, generated new types of emotional dissonance.

Workers experienced "Zoom fatigue" and emotional exhaustion because of constant self-surveillance, camera nervousness, and the lack of informal social recovery (Çakar et al., 2022). Emotional expression on text-based sites also demanded coded positivity, such as word choice or the use of emojis, and therefore the accumulation of subtle but emotional burdens.

### **6.5 Cross-Cultural Influences**

Cultural norms influence both emotional display rules and interpretation of emotional expression. Significant differences in the impact of emotional labour on employees were found between cultures by the review.

Emotional conformity, which is culturally valued in collectivist cultures like Japan, South Korea, and China, diminishes perceived dissonance. Individualist cultures like the U.S. or U.K., where authenticity is valued, saw surface acting creating more feelings of inauthenticity and alienation.

Notably, hybrid cultures—e.g., India and Brazil—demonstrated nuanced emotional display norms, in which emotional management is both organizationally necessitated and culturally supported, producing countervailing pressures.

### **6.6 Technological Mediation and Surveillance**

Artificial intelligence and emotion-tracking technologies increasingly track sentiment and customer satisfaction within service industries. Although they provide feedback for performance enhancement, they also introduce emotional surveillance.

The examination confirmed increasing tensions between privacy, autonomy, and emotional truth. Workers in AI-enabled workplaces felt they needed to present emotionally good selves in response to being monitored for expressions and tones. This technology-mediated emotional labour promotes emotional tension and depersonalization.

### **6.7 Integrated Patterns and Theoretical Implications**

The account lends strength to Grandey's (2000) stress-strain model and broadens it with newer research. Emotional labour operates as a psychological resource-demanding job requirement. Its influence is mediated by individual variation and moderated by organizational and contextual variables.

A new theoretical contribution is the "emotional labour-resource spiral": chronic involvement in surface or deep acting depletes emotional resources, diminishing coping effectiveness, which in turn boosts emotional labour requirement—thus starting a spiral of burnout. On the other hand, when organizations restore emotional resources by means of support and training, this spiral can be broken.

## 6.8 Practical Implications

Conclusions point towards the necessity of multi-faceted intervention:

- Emotional regulation and EI development training to move from surface to deep acting.
- Empathetic leadership and lower emotional display expectations from managers.
- Variable emotional display rules that permit more genuine interactions.
- Emotional recovery time incorporated into daily routines (e.g., breaks, no-camera policies).
- Feedback systems that acknowledge emotional effort, rather than performance measures.
- Cultural awareness in training emotional labour norms for global workforces.

## 7. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current systematic review of literature critically explored the association between emotional labour and burnout, synthesizing 420 empirical studies between 2020 and 2025. The results highlight the psychological toll of emotional regulation at work, showing intricate interactions between emotional labour strategies, occupational context, and individual and organizational moderators. As service work remains to characterize global employment, the emotional dynamics of such work become increasingly important for organizational performance and employee well-being.

### 7.1 Key Findings Summary

The review invariably established that surface acting—trying to simulate or hide authentic feelings—had a strong relationship with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, the central facets of burnout. Workers who frequently practice surface acting experience more emotional depletion, mental fatigue, and reduced job satisfaction. The correlation was strongest in careers that involve prolonged interpersonal contact, for example, healthcare, teaching, hospitality, and customer service.

Deep acting, though otherwise considered healthier, was reported to have dual outcomes. It may create sincerity and improved delivery of service in the short term, but it may also induce psychological stress when deep acting continues to be performed in the long term as an effort to always self-monitor and get emotionally constricted. Emotional energy invested to truly feel necessity-based emotions, particularly in heavy-duty jobs, presents a challenge to sustainability in resource-constrained settings.

Sectoral differences became a key axis of analysis. Within healthcare, emotional strain from working with patients and institutional limitations was a major factor in burnout. Teachers within public education environments bore the brunt of emotional labour with few behavioural challenges, little administrative relief, and frequent disruptions. Hospitality and customer service workers found their "smile as part of the job" mentality manifest in endemic emotional dissonance and high turnover rates. These sector-specific observations show that even though emotional labor is a general phenomenon, burnout consequences associated with it are very context-sensitive.

The review also emphasized significant moderating and mediating variables. High emotional intelligence facilitated individuals to better deal with emotional demands, whereas organizational support in terms of autonomy, supervisor support, and emotional training was found to buffer the negative effects of emotional labour. Furthermore, cultural dimensions influenced the way emotional expression was viewed and performed. In collectivist cultures, adherence to emotional display rules was more normative and, hence, possibly diminished dissonance. In individualist cultures, however, authenticity conflicts were exaggerated, increasing burnout risk.

Another significant finding pertains to the development of digital emotional labour, particularly in hybrid and remote work arrangements after the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers who handled emotions through video calls or digital communication platforms reported distinct challenges—"Zoom fatigue" or "digital emotional dissonance"—that provided a new aspect to emotional labour studies. These trends indicate emerging types of emotional labour that extend beyond conventional face-to-face service interactions.

### 7.2 Theoretical Implications

This review adds to the theoretical advancement of emotional labour and burnout models by reaffirming surface acting as conditionally maladaptive and situating deep acting as conditionally adaptive. The results validate Grandey's (2000) integrative model and expand it by including technological, cultural, and organizational dynamics after 2020. Further, the inclusion of emotional intelligence and organizational support within the stress-strain paradigm provides a more complete perspective on resilience in emotional labour.

Moreover, the review emphasizes the emotional labour–burnout dynamic as a reciprocal interplay that is shaped by both individual and environmental factors. It proposes the necessity of multi-level theoretical models that take into account individual ability, task design, institutional culture, and wider socio-cultural factors. This is particularly important in a time when hybrid workspaces dissolve conventional emotional boundaries.

### 7.3 Practical Implications

For practitioners, the review highlights that there is a necessity to reimagine emotional labour as a managed occupational requirement, not an unseen or accidental consequence of service work. Organizations should identify emotional expression as a form of performance to be trained for, supported for, and regulated.



Some strategies for practice include:

- **Emotional Regulation Training:** Training employees with skills in emotional awareness, expression, and recovery can minimize reliance on surface acting and lower the risk of burnout.
- **Organizational Support Systems:** Building mentoring, peer support groups, and accessible mental health services boosts emotional resilience.
- **Job Design Reforms:** Expanding job autonomy and minimizing emotional display rules where feasible can revive employee authenticity.
- **Performance Appraisal Innovations:** Measuring emotional effort in performance metrics validates invisible labour and enhances job satisfaction.
- **Technology Moderation:** Managing video-based emotional expectations (e.g., camera-on requirements) in remote work can minimize digital fatigue.

By incorporating emotional labour issues into HR practices, leadership, and organizational culture, businesses are able to create more sustainable service cultures.

#### **7.4 Limitations of the Review**

In as much as it takes a holistic approach, this review has some limitations:

- **Database Restriction:** The sole reliance on the Scopus database might have prevented relevant studies listed in other databases like Web of Science, PsycINFO, or Google Scholar.
- **Language and Time Limitations:** English-language articles between 2020 and 2025 were considered, possibly excluding important results in other languages or earlier studies that are still applicable.
- **Absence of Meta-Analysis:** Although thematic synthesis was used in this review, no statistical meta-analysis was performed, which might have calculated effect sizes between studies.
- **Contextual Generalization:** While sectoral findings were presented, generalizations across industries and cultures need to be made cautiously because of study heterogeneity.

Future systematic reviews might overcome these limitations by including wider data sources, performing quantitative meta-analyses, and investigating industry-specific or regional sub-reviews.

#### **7.5 Future Research Suggestions**

The review points to several areas for further academic research:

1. **Longitudinal Deep Acting Studies:** There is a need for more research to follow the long-term psychological effects of deep acting. It is important to know if cumulative deep acting contributes to adaptive emotional maturity or emotional depletion.
2. **Digital Emotional Labour:** As hybrid and remote work become normalized, future research must explore how emotional labour is enacted via digital interfaces. Topics like camera fatigue, chat-based customer interactions, and emotion display in virtual environments deserve focused attention.
3. **Emotional Monitoring and AI:** As emotion-sensing technologies and AI-powered customer service software become more prevalent, questions arise regarding surveillance, emotional sincerity, and privacy. Studies must investigate the impact of emotion-monitoring software on employee stress levels and autonomy.
4. **Cross-Cultural Comparisons:** Cultural differences in emotional display rules are still understudied. Cross-cultural studies between collectivist and individualist cultures, or Western and Eastern service economies, can provide insight into culturally effective emotional labour strategies.
5. **Personality Trait Role:** Although emotional intelligence has been in the limelight, other personality measures—neuroticism, extraversion, or agreeableness—may affect the performance of emotional labour and burnout by employees.
6. **Intervention-Based Research:** Experimental and quasi-experimental research examining the efficacy of interventions (e.g., mindfulness, expressive writing, emotional coaching) should be conducted to establish evidence-based interventions for managing emotional labour.
7. **Profession-Specific Models:** More nuanced models specific to a particular profession like nursing, teaching, call centers, or civil administration are needed, which recognize institutional and relational dynamics of each setting.
8. **Emotional Labour in the Gig Economy:** Freelancers on digital platforms like Uber or Upwork face emotional demands without organizational backing. This new work pattern needs frameworks recognizing emotional risks in algorithmic work settings.
9. **Gender and Intersectionality:** Emotional labour disproportionately impacts women and marginalized groups. Future studies should take intersectional perspectives to examine how gender, race, and socio-economic status intersect with emotional expectations and burnout.
10. **Emotional Labour Metrics Development:** Ongoing development of measurement tools, including revised emotional labour scales for online environments, can enhance the validity and generalizability of research findings.

#### **7.6 Conclusion**

In summary, emotional labour is still a double-edged sword in contemporary workplaces—supporting service excellence on the one hand but draining emotional resources on the other. The systematic review supports that

whereas emotional regulation is unavoidable in service work, unmanaged emotional demands, especially surface acting, are an antecedent to burnout. Organisations need to break away from perceiving emotions as personal issues and instead treat emotional labour as an integral aspect of occupational health.

By investing in preventative measures, supportive infrastructure, and inclusive workplace cultures, employers are able to safeguard their most valuable asset—the emotional well-being of their people. Scholars, on the other hand, must continue to shed light on this unseen labour through forward-thinking methodologies, sector-specific analysis, and actionable frameworks. By doing so, we are able to ensure that emotional involvement strengthens, not imperils, the future of work.

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