



# Does mindfulness reduce emotional exhaustion? A multilevel analysis of emotional labor among casino employees



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 31 March 2016

Received in revised form 12 February 2017

Accepted 31 March 2017

### Keywords:

Mindfulness

Surface acting

The climate of authenticity

Emotional exhaustion

## ABSTRACT

Mindfulness has received considerable attention over the past few years in prior psychology literature. However, the role of mindfulness has yet to receive sufficient attention in the service sector, especially the casino service sector. The objective of the current study is to examine whether casino frontline employees' perceptions of surface acting mediate the relationship between mindfulness and emotional exhaustion and to investigate the moderating role of a climate of authenticity in the process of their formation of emotional exhaustion. Hierarchical linear modeling results indicate that casino frontline employees' perceived mindfulness has a significant negative influence on their surface acting, which ultimately has a significant positive effect on their emotional exhaustion. In addition, the significant positive association between surface acting and emotional exhaustion is moderated by the authentic climate. A higher degree of authenticity within the climate weakens the positive impact of surface acting on casino employees' emotional exhaustion.

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## 1. Introduction

Emotional exhaustion is a special type of physical and psychological state of depletion. The problems of emotional exhaustion, with its accompanying high turnover rate, poor employee performance, and low level of organizational effectiveness, has attracted substantial interest in the body of hospitality literature (Kim, 2008; Lee and Ok, 2012). Compared to other service sector jobs (e.g., hotel, restaurant, airline, and call center), many casino frontline employees experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion due to the 24/7 nature of the casino business, demanding workloads, an artificial and noisy work environment, antisocial hours, poor air quality, and biological and physical hazards (Chan et al., 2015; Hing and Breen, 2005; Li et al., 2017; Tiyce et al., 2013; Wan and Chan, 2013). Thus, the possible antecedents of emotional exhaustion have been receiving increasing attention in the hospitality literature (Jung et al., 2012). Among these factors, surface acting has been found to correlate strongly with emotional exhaustion (Kim, 2008). For example, due to a lack of proper skills and correct strategies for

coping with emotional exhaustion, employees manage emotional exhaustion by relying on surface acting, in which their worries are concealed so that others do not recognize that they are outside their comfort zone (Tiyce et al., 2013; Van Dijk et al., 2011). Concealing one's emotion by service acting is particularly common with frontline casino employees as they often deal with overly emotional gamblers whose feelings range from anger at losing to euphoria from winning, and who routinely act unreasonably (Wan, 2010).

Recent research has shown that mindfulness buffers employees against negative mood (Hülshager et al., 2013). Mindfulness describes a conscious direction of an open attention in which people can complete awareness of their feelings and sensations on a moment-to-moment basis without judgment (Hülshager et al., 2013). Mindfulness has an important role to play when it comes to work-related outcomes. For example, Hülshager et al. (2013) described a negative association between mindfulness and aggressive behaviors such as physical and verbal aggression. Hyland et al. (2015) further pointed out that employees who are mindful have improved social relationships, reduced psychological distress, improved physical and mental well-being, enhanced overall well-being, and increased individual and organizational performance. Previous studies have acknowledged that a mindfulness-based coping strategy is an effective means of mitigating dissolution (Bazarko et al., 2013; Hülshager et al., 2013; Hyland et al., 2015). Thus, an

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understanding of what causes the emotional exhaustion of casino employees will help casinos and other service providers to reduce the costs associated with the erosion of employee performance and loyalty (O'Connell and Kung, 2007; Ongori and Agolla, 2008). Despite the important role of mindfulness and surface acting on employee behaviors, their direct and indirect impacts on emotional exhaustion have largely been ignored in hospitality research; thus creating a void in the literature. The first objective of the present study is, therefore, to examine the mediating effect of surface acting on the relationship between mindfulness and emotional exhaustion in the casino setting.

Prior studies have posited that the work environment has both positive and negative effects on employees (Lundberg et al., 2009). A healthy and positive work environment makes employees productive and improves job communication, and this provides motivation that sustains them throughout the day (Gursoy et al., 2008). Recent research in the management and organizational behavior literature has focused on how an authentic climate in the workplace contributes towards workers' employment and psychological wellbeing. A climate of authenticity refers to the common perceptions and norms that define the self-expression of its member's emotions, in terms of values and acceptance of emotional expression, especially the negative emotions of an organization (Cicekli, 2011). Grandey et al. (2012) argued that employees feel encouraged and appreciated when they are working in an environment with a climate of authenticity in which they can feel as though they are essentially 'taking a break' from the constrained organizational rules, thus reducing their stress and emotional exhaustion. In the light of these findings, it seems plausible to speculate that employees are more productive and creative in the workplace when they feel comfortable being themselves because they can focus their attention on work rather than on hiding parts of themselves. This premise coupled with the role of surface acting purports a more complete theoretical advancement about the precise cause of emotional exhaustion. In particular, it helps not only to demonstrate the direct influence of employee surface acting and an organization's climate of authenticity on employee emotional depletion, but it also helps to understand how organizational climate could act as a buffering condition that moderates the negative surface acting effect. Thus, to enrich the understanding of service acting, which is germane to the organizational climate theory, the second objective of this research study is to determine whether the moderator variable (i.e., casino frontline employees' perceived climate of authenticity) affects the strength of the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion. In summary, this study attempts to extend the previous literature by assessing the indirect effect of mindfulness on emotional exhaustion through service acting; it also aims to enrich organizational climate theory by assessing the cross-level moderating effect of climate of authenticity in the context of casinos.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1. State of mindfulness

Employees are required to comply with organizational rules (Zhou, 1993) and thus need to suppress and disguise their feelings by surface acting (Judge et al., 2009), which usually involves managing emotions using an artificial voice and facial expressions when exhibiting the emotions required by the job (Hülshager and Schewe, 2011). Effective emotion management by employees is recognized as an essential component for increasing customer loyalty in the hospitality industry (Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009). Casinos often require employees to exhibit surface acting when communicating and interacting with customers face-to-face (Chan

et al., 2015). For example, a casino dealer has to greet gamblers with a smile even if he or she feels gloomy (Wan, 2013).

Previous research has demonstrated that mindfulness is likely to have a negative impact on surface acting (Baer et al., 2006). Mindfulness concerns a receptive state of awareness: paying attention with open sensations or feelings of current happenings and observing both ongoing internal and external events at the same time (Hülshager et al., 2013). Jimenez et al. (2010) argued that mindfulness stimulates individuals' self-regulatory activities or skills by eliminating impediments and reducing stress response, thereby allowing people to display greater self-determination and less defensive responses. Fetterman et al. (2010) found that mindfulness was negatively associated with impulsivity but positively related to self-control. Hülshager et al. (2013) examined whether the idea of self-training mindfulness in the workplace could reduce stress in participants whose jobs involved face-to-face interactions with customers. Their results showed that participants who received mindfulness self-training used less surface acting and felt less emotional exhaustion. In particular, participants who received mindfulness training had higher mindfulness ratings, felt less emotional exhaustion, and had greater job satisfaction. Given that mindfulness can act as a buffer in mitigating employee emotional depletion, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Mindfulness is negatively related with the emotional suppression of surface acting.

### 2.2. Surface acting and emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is a state of emotional and mental frustration resulting from continuous stress that leads to high depersonalization and burnout (Maslach and Leiter, 2008). Grandey (2003) argued that emotional exhaustion resulted from a combination of depression, emotional listlessness, and a cynical attitude toward environmental stressors. Two complex causes lead to emotional exhaustion: (1) the incremental job-induced tension that emotional dissonance can produce (Lewig and Dollard, 2003), and (2) the draining of mental resources by the efforts of the emotional regulation process (Grandey, 2003). Based on a systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature on emotional labor, Hülshager and Schewe (2011) found that surface acting was associated with emotional depletion across multiple industries. Hülshager and Schewe (2011) further argued that increased surface acting is a determinant of emotional exhaustion because it involves the continual evaluation and modification of emotional reactions. The constant depression between expressed and felt emotions requires mental effort and drains mental energy. The positive relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion goes beyond for-profit organizations, as studies show a negative link between these two constructs in public sectors such as firefighting (Dobson et al., 2011).

Given the acknowledged influence of surface acting on emotional exhaustion, the authors believe that this effect would be even stronger in casino settings. The rationale stems from the fact that frontline casino employees are trained and encouraged to conform to high service standards in order to deliver excellent customer experiences (Yang et al., 2015; Wong, 2013). Thus, they present a vented emotion by using a specific facial expression with an unnatural and artificial body language during the service delivery process, which introduces stress and emotional exhaustion (Wan 2013). Diestel and Schmidt (2012) argued that undesired behaviors and emotions may cause a variety of long-lasting psychological side effects such as emotional depletion and depersonalization. They further pointed out that self-control demands were positively related to emotional exhaustion, and surface acting was a sign of physical and emotional depletion. This situation is particularly

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