



Discussion paper

The impact of emotional labor on employees' work-life balance perception and commitment: A study in the hospitality industry



Verena Hofmann*, Nicola E. Stokburger-Sauer

Department of Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism, University of Innsbruck Universitaetsstr. 15, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria

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ABSTRACT

Although emotional labor gains considerable interest in research and practice, current hospitality management literature has neglected to investigate its influence on employee commitment and the mediating roles of work-life balance perception and job satisfaction. Referring to emotional labor theory, this paper examines these interconnections by conducting a three-phase empirical study in the hotel industry. Results of the first study reveal that employees' positive emotion display and emotional dissonance negatively influence employees' work-life balance which in turn drives employees' affective commitment. Results of the second study confirm emotional labor's impact on their work-life balance perception. Conversely, job satisfaction is solely influenced by emotional dissonance. Work-life balance and job satisfaction further drive employees' commitment. Results of the third study partially replicate these results: Emotional labor negatively impacts on employees' work-life balance and job satisfaction which both drive their commitment. This study helps to understand the relevance of hotel employees' commitment, and thus, their increased retention in the firm. Implications for management and research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Seasonal variations, exhausting working hours, shifting duties (Wong and Ko, 2009) and demanding service interactions (Cugini et al., 2007; Tsai, 2009) make the hotel industry a challenging working environment. Service employees' positive emotion display is an important job requirement to be met (Chen et al., 2012; Dyer et al., 2010; Murray, 2015) because guests expect friendliness. Thus, positive emotions increase positive customer responses, such as customer satisfaction (Barger and Grandey, 2006) and quality perception (Pugh, 2001). A positive employee-customer contact is therefore crucial and the service employees are one of the most relevant success factors for hotel managers (Tsai, 2009). Employees, however, often work over time (Wong and Ko, 2009) resulting in an unbalanced work-life. Emotional labor, which constitutes "the emotional regulation required of the employees in the display of organizationally desired emotions" (Zapf et al., 1999; p. 371), might lead to work-life-conflicts, too (Hochschild, 2006). Both emotional labor and work-life conflicts are found to decrease employees' well-

being (Major and Morganson, 2011) and increase psychological stress (e.g., Shankar and Bhatnagar, 2010). This eventually leads to low employee commitment (Deery and Jago, 2009) and work withdrawal (Scott and Barnes, 2011).

In view of increasing competition and lack of skilled labor, companies in the hotel industry are asked to find means for long-term employee retention (Cugini et al., 2007). Employee commitment, which can be understood as the "link between the employee and organization that decreases the likelihood of turnover" (Allen and Meyer, 1990; p. 3), plays an important role because committed employees feel attached to the company (Allen and Meyer, 1990). This attachment results in lower employee turnover and higher productivity (Gautam et al., 2004), both of which are equally important for companies in the hospitality industry.

In order to improve the working conditions and consequently retain highly qualified employees, practice and research need to focus on the influence of emotional labor on employees' work-life balance (i.e., the conflict-free reconciliation of professional and private life; Shankar and Bhatnagar, 2010), job satisfaction and, consequently, employee commitment. Even though emotional labor is a well-known concept in hospitality and tourism research (e.g., Chen et al., 2012; Chu and Murrmann, 2006; Dyer et al., 2010; Hunter and Penney, 2014; Murray, 2015), little empirical evidence is available on the link of emotional labor and work-life balance as well as job satisfaction and their relationship with employee

* Corresponding author at: Verena Hofmann Department of Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism, University of Innsbruck, Universitaetsstr. 15, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria.

E-mail addresses: verena.hofmann@uibk.ac.at (V. Hofmann), nicola.stokburger-sauer@uibk.ac.at (N.E. Stokburger-Sauer).

commitment. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to theoretically and empirically examine the impact of employees' emotional labor on work-life balance perception, job satisfaction and commitment. In doing so, this study is the first to link emotional labor, work-life balance, job satisfaction and commitment in a hospitality industry context. To test the proposed relationships, three empirical studies are conducted.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

2.1. The impact of emotional labor on work-life balance perception and job satisfaction

Emotional labor (e.g., [Chen et al., 2012](#)) and work-life balance (e.g., [Wong and Ko, 2009](#)) are two highly relevant aspects in hospitality research and practice. Generally, employees' work-life balance perception is influenced by the interplay of private and professional life ([Clark, 2000](#)). Additionally, the literature claims the existence of a spillover effect between professional and private life (e.g., [Edwards and Rothbard, 2000](#); [Guest, 2002](#); [Ilies et al., 2009](#)), thus assuming a mutual influence between the two domains. That is, the two domains co-exist and determine whether the work-life is perceived as balanced or not (e.g., [Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985](#); [Montgomery et al., 2005](#)). Whereas a negative perception of work-life balance arises as a result of conflicts between these two domains, one's work-life is perceived as balanced under the condition that these areas coexist harmoniously ([Clark, 2000](#)). More specifically, a conflict-free reconciliation of professional and private life leads to a positive perception of work-life balance ([Shankar and Bhatnagar, 2010](#)). This reconciliation of the two domains is also related to the specific demands ([Montgomery et al., 2005](#)) and the different roles that employees have to take on in these two domains ([Fombelle et al., 2012](#)).

Emotional labor plays a crucial role here. [Zapf et al. \(1999, 2005\)](#) suggest emotional labor to comprise the following aspects; requirement to display positive and negative emotions, sensitivity requirements, emotional interaction leeway, emotional controls, sensitivity requirements, and emotional dissonance, all of which target at employees' expression of friendliness and emotion regulation. Independent of the conceptualization, emotional labor takes different forms in private and professional life ([Hochschild, 2006](#)).

Emotional labor in private life, which is named emotion work, is shaped by the existence of social norms and aims at establishing and regulating private interactions. Thus, in this context emotion work is self-determined ([Hochschild, 2006](#)); that is, one does not have to follow others' goals or requirements and does not receive money as exchange for the emotion work. Following this assumption, less hierarchical relationships are found in private life versus professional life. In other words, one is not subordinated to companies' goals, and consequently, is also allowed to display various emotions including negative ones such as sadness ([Hochschild, 2006](#)). However, even in private domains there might be display rules suggesting which emotions should be shown or hidden in specific situations, but these display rules are different to those in professional life since they are related to private role demands ([Yanchus et al., 2010](#)). Private life for example asks to take the role of being mother/father or wife/husband describing that one has to be soft and caring. Conversely, emotional labor in an organizational context generally aims at "the display of expected emotions by service agents during service encounters" ([Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993](#); p. 88); that is, service employees have to display "organizationally desired emotions" ([Zapf et al., 1999](#); p. 371) and simultaneously suppress negative ones ([Lam et al., 2010](#)). That is, first, service employees have to take the role of being friendly

at any time. Second, the company determines how emotional labor needs to be performed, and thus, the display of specific emotions and the job role is others-directed ([Hochschild, 2006](#)). Especially the display of positive emotions, understood as the extent of positive emotion displays and avoidance of negative ones ([Lam et al., 2010](#); [Zapf et al., 2005](#)), constitutes a job requirement to be met in professional life ([Lam et al., 2010](#); [Murray, 2015](#)). As a result, service employees are requested to express specific emotions in order to meet customers' ([Hochschild, 2006](#)) and companies' expectations ([Zapf et al., 2001](#)) in the sense of friendliness ([Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993](#)) as important driver of favorable customer responses ([Lam et al., 2010](#)). In this regard, service employees often view emotional labor as a stressor (e.g., [Zapf et al., 1999](#)) because it constitutes a means to satisfy both customers and the company ([Hochschild, 2006](#)). Finally, compared to private life, the employee becomes paid for displaying positive emotions in professional life ([Hochschild, 2006](#)).

As a result, the requirement of positive emotion display often leads to the development of emotional dissonance (e.g., [Hunter and Penney, 2014](#); [Nerdinger, 2011](#)) which is defined as one's area of tension between felt and actually displayed emotions ([Zapf et al., 2001](#)). Emotional dissonance arises from the need to solely display positive emotions ([Hochschild, 2006](#)) independent of employee's current emotional state ([Chen et al., 2012](#); [Phillips et al., 2006](#)). It causes role-conflicts ([Hwa, 2012](#)) because of its lack of complementarity between job requirements and employees' expectations towards the workplace ([Nerdinger, 2011](#)). Similar to the need to display positive emotions, emotional dissonance affects the perception of work-life balance, because the employee has to take different and incompatible roles in the two domains of private and professional life ([Hochschild, 2006](#)). As an additional example, a service employee (e.g., a flight attendant) feels sad due to private problems, but needs to continuously smile and be friendly in service interactions ([Yanchus et al., 2010](#)) which consequently results in the occurrence of emotional dissonance. Conversely, the two roles might even be incompatible when a service employee needs to be authoritarian (e.g., advocate) or combative (e.g., trial lawyer; [Yanchus et al., 2010](#)) at work, but caring and nice at home. Previous studies also regard emotional labor as antecedent to work-life balance and provide evidence for a significant effect of emotional labor on work-life balance perception (e.g., [Cheung and Tang, 2009](#); [Montgomery et al., 2005/2006](#); [Schulz et al., 2004](#); [Yanchus et al., 2010](#)) as both private and professional life demand taking totally different roles in the area of emotional labor which might lead to work-family conflicts ([Yanchus et al., 2010](#)). Moreover, negative emotions at work, for example, have a negative effect on private life ([Schulz et al., 2004](#)). While some studies claim deep-acting (i.e., the modification of actual feelings to match required emotional display, [Hochschild, 2006](#)) to overcome such conflicts (e.g., [Huang et al., 2015](#)), others (e.g., [Zapf et al., 1999](#)) propose no difference; that is, it does not matter whether the employee engages in deep versus surface-acting (i.e., the display of requisite emotions without a corresponding inner emotional adjustment; [Hochschild, 2006](#)). This study therefore does not differentiate between these two emotional labor strategies.

Similarly to the impact on employees' work-life balance, the performance of emotional labor drives employees' job satisfaction ([Chen et al., 2012](#)) which is understood as ones' reactions to different job characteristics ([Macdonald and MacIntyre, 1997](#)). In addition to the job requirement of emotional labor such reactions depend on individual and personality characteristics (e.g., [Koys, 2001](#); [Poggi, 2010](#); [Tsai, 2009](#)). In sum, emotional labor, which consists of emotional dissonance and the need to display positive emotions, causes various stress reactions ([Zapf et al., 1999, 2001](#)), leads to low job performance and satisfaction ([Cheung and Tang, 2007](#); [Phillips et al., 2006](#)), and further influences private life due

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