

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL LABOR IN PREDICTING TURNOVER INTENTION: INVESTIGATING JOB SATISFACTION AS A MEDIATOR

Xiaobo Xu*

International College, Dhurakij Pundit University

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Abstract

This study delves into the interaction between emotional labor and job satisfaction among the workforce in Chinese enterprises, with a particular focus on their combined impact on turnover intention. To aid businesses in navigating rapid market changes and management challenges, this research achieves several objectives using cross-industry survey data: (1) systematically assessing the direct influence of various forms of emotional labor—including surface acting, deep acting, and authentic emotional expressions—on employees' turnover intention; (2) exploring the mediating role of job satisfaction between emotional labor and turnover intention; (3) constructing and validating a theoretical model depicting the relationships among emotional labor, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. Combining online surveys and email questionnaires, this study surveyed employees from various enterprises in Hebei Province, China, collecting a total of 532 responses, of which 428 were deemed valid. Grounded in emotional labor theory, the study employs hierarchical mediation regression modeling to investigate the impact of emotional labor on turnover intention.

Keywords: Emotional Labor, Turnover Intention, Job Satisfaction

Introduction

In contemporary work environments, emotional labor is increasingly critical to employee roles, particularly within organizational contexts. Defined by Hochschild, emotional labor involves the regulation and modification of emotional expressions to align with organizational expectations (Hochschild, 1979). As workplace competition escalates and job pressures mount, the impact of emotional labor extends to employees' psychological

health and their attitudes towards work, influencing both their job satisfaction and their likelihood to leave their positions. Although the relationships among emotional labor, job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover intention have been previously explored, the pathways linking emotional labor to turnover intention through job satisfaction remain underexplored.

This study is dedicated to examining the influence of emotional labor on turnover intentions, highlighting job satisfaction's role

*Corresponding Author

E-mail: 361856301@qq.com

as a mediator by employing a hierarchical mediation regression model. It delves into both the direct consequences of surface and deep acting strategies in emotional labor on turnover intentions, and how authentic emotional expressions can affect job satisfaction and subsequent turnover intentions. Our comprehensive analysis aims to equip organizational leaders with actionable insights to refine emotional labor management, boost job satisfaction, and thereby decrease turnover rates.

Although the potential impact of emotional labor on employee turnover intentions has received considerable attention, existing literature lacks a comprehensive exploration of its mechanisms, especially the mediating role of job satisfaction between emotional labor and turnover intentions. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by employing a hierarchical mediation regression model to thoroughly investigate how surface and deep acting strategies in emotional labor directly affect turnover intentions, and how genuine emotional expressions influence turnover intentions through job satisfaction.

The paper begins by outlining the theoretical underpinnings and prior research on emotional labor, turnover intention, and job satisfaction, establishing a clear conceptual framework. It then details the methodology employed, including the instruments used for measurement, the procedure for data collection, and the analytic techniques. The empirical analysis of the survey data uncovers notable links between emotional labor, job satisfaction, and turnover

intention, confirming the mediating effect of job satisfaction. The findings are discussed in terms of both theoretical contributions and practical applications, culminating in targeted management strategies designed to help organizations effectively navigate the challenges of emotional labor, enhance employee satisfaction, and minimize turnover intentions.

Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to examine the effects of emotional labor on turnover intention, grounded in the theoretical framework of emotional labor theory, and to assess the intermediary role of job satisfaction within this dynamic. This investigation utilizes a hierarchical mediation regression model to achieve several key goals:

1. Evaluate the direct effects of various forms of emotional labor—including surface acting, deep acting, and authentic emotional expressions—on the propensity of employees to remain with or depart from their organization, to ascertain how distinct strategies of emotional labor impact retention decisions.

2. Explore how job satisfaction serves as a conduit through which emotional labor influences turnover intentions, thereby detailing the mechanism by which emotional labor can lead to changes in turnover intention.

3. Develop and empirically test a theoretical model that encapsulates the interconnections between emotional labor, job satisfaction, and turnover intention.

Literature Review

Conceptual Definitions

Emotional labor refers to the process of managing and adjusting emotional expressions in the workplace to meet the requirements of professional roles (Hochschild, 1979). This concept transcends traditional boundaries of physical and mental labor, recognizing emotional management as part of labor. According to Hochschild's theory, emotional labor mainly comprises two dimensions: surface acting (adjustment of outward emotional expressions) and deep acting (adjustment of inner emotional feelings). Building upon this, Diefendorff and Gosserand (2003) added a third dimension—genuine emotional expression, emphasizing that when employees' actual emotional experiences align with organizational demands, natural emotional expression is also a form of emotional labor.

Turnover intention refers to the psychological inclination of an individual to leave their current employer, distinct from actual turnover behavior. It represents an employee's intention to voluntarily terminate their employment relationship after consideration. While turnover intention is not directly equivalent to actual turnover, it serves as a crucial antecedent indicator for predicting employees' actual turnover behavior (Mobley, 1977). Research indicates that the formation of turnover intention often reflects employees' dissatisfaction with their current work environment, which may stem from various factors including but

not limited to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work stress (Kirschenbaum & Weisberg, 1994). Therefore, identifying and understanding turnover intention is of significant importance for organizational management and the formulation of human resource strategies.

Job satisfaction refers to an individual's awareness state of achieving a sense of complete immersion and enjoyment of activities in the workplace, which arises when there is a balance between job challenges and personal skills (Bakker, 2008). This state represents a peak experience that individuals experience in their work, characterized by three core features: concentration, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation. Bakker introduced the concept of flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993) into the work context, suggesting that when job demands match employees' professional skills as much as possible, job satisfaction can be maximized, thereby promoting employees' active involvement and high performance. Therefore, job satisfaction not only reflects the optimized psychological state of individuals in their professional activities but also points to potential pathways for enhancing job satisfaction and productivity.

Theoretical Foundation

The theory of emotional labor, initially proposed by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983, is defined as the process of managing and adjusting one's emotional expressions in the workplace according to organizational requirements (Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild

points out that emotional labor involves displaying the emotions demanded by the job, which may sometimes be inconsistent with an individual's true feelings, leading to emotional exhaustion and psychological detachment. This emotional inconsistency and the resulting emotional exhaustion, according to emotional labor theory, not only reduce employees' job satisfaction but may also increase their turnover intention. Therefore, the theory of emotional labor provides a theoretical framework for exploring how emotional labor demands influence job satisfaction and subsequently affect employees' turnover intention. It emphasizes the importance of managing emotional labor and the need to provide appropriate emotional support and resources to employees to mitigate the impact of emotional exhaustion and improve employee retention rates.

Emotional Labor and Turnover Intention

After conducting in-depth research on emotional labor among preschool teachers, Xie et al. (2023) observed that due to the instability of children's emotions, preschool teachers often find themselves in a state of high emotional labor. This prolonged emotional pressure not only depletes teachers' mental and emotional resources but also, when the accumulated sense of suppression from emotional labor is not released through appropriate means and channels, is more likely to lead to increased turnover behavior among teachers. This finding is consistent with the results of Li and Peng

(2018) study, where they also pointed out a significant correlation between emotional labor and employee turnover intention. These research findings collectively point to a central observation: emotional labor is a key factor influencing employees' turnover intention, especially in work environments with high emotional demands.

Based on the literature review and theoretical analysis, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

H1: A significant correlation exists between emotional labor and turnover intention.

H1a: Deep acting is significantly negatively correlated with turnover intention.

H1b: Surface acting is significantly positively correlated with turnover intention.

H1c: Genuine emotional expression significantly decreases turnover intention.

Emotional Labor and Job Satisfaction

Emotional labor, as defined by Hochschild (1983), is the process by which individuals manage and regulate their emotions at work to meet organizational requirements for emotional expression. This process demands that employees regulate internal emotions or external expressions in specific contexts to adapt to the needs of their occupational roles. When employees can effectively engage in emotional labor, such as through deep acting or genuine emotional expression, they often experience higher job satisfaction and a greater sense of well-being. This is because such forms of emotional regulation help them achieve consistency

between personal values and career goals. Conversely, when emotional labor primarily relies on surface acting, where emotional expressions are adjusted superficially without corresponding internal changes, employees may experience emotional exhaustion and work-related fatigue, negatively impacting their sense of job satisfaction. This is because prolonged emotional inconsistency can deplete individuals' psychological resources, leading to decreased job satisfaction. Relevant literature further supports this view. For example, Lam et al. (2022) found that effective emotional labor strategies, such as deep acting, are closely associated with positive work outcomes for employees, including higher job satisfaction and personal well-being. Meanwhile, research by Amissah et al. (2022) suggests that relying on surface acting in emotional labor is associated with work-related fatigue and emotional exhaustion, further confirming the complex relationship between emotional labor strategies and job satisfaction.

Based on the literature review and theoretical analysis, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

H2: A significant relationship is evident between emotional labor and job satisfaction.

H2a: Deep acting significantly enhances job satisfaction.

H2b: Surface acting significantly reduces job satisfaction.

H2c: Genuine emotional expression significantly boosts job satisfaction.

Job Satisfaction and Turnover Intention

In recent years, when exploring the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention, Quek et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of job satisfaction in predicting employee turnover behavior. Their research indicated a significant negative correlation between job satisfaction and turnover intention, suggesting that employees with higher job satisfaction are less inclined to leave their current positions. This finding is crucial for organizations as it underscores the importance of enhancing employee job satisfaction as one of the strategies to reduce turnover rates. Additionally, Berber et al. (2022) found that job satisfaction significantly influences both job burnout and turnover intention, highlighting the need to improve job satisfaction to retain employees.

Based on the literature review and theoretical analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study:

H3: Job satisfaction significantly inversely affects turnover intention.

The Mediating Effect of Job Satisfaction

Based on the study by Brotheridge and Grandey (2002), when employees engage in surface acting, wherein their external expressions are incongruent with their inner emotions, this emotional incongruence often transforms into negative emotions, eroding the employees' job satisfaction. Here, job satisfaction is understood as employees' overall evaluation of their job experience, encompassing emotional satisfaction and

psychological well-being. Lower job satisfaction may prompt employees to develop stronger motivations to seek new job positions to escape the need for emotional pretense in their current situation. Additionally, He et al. (2020) proposed that emotional consistency is a crucial factor in enhancing job satisfaction, with employees with higher job satisfaction being less inclined to resign. They also noted that genuine emotional expression is not directly linked to turnover intention, suggesting that job satisfaction may serve as a mediating factor connecting emotional labor to turnover intention.

From these insights, we deduce that emotional labor indirectly shapes turnover intention via its effects on job satisfaction. The specific strategies of emotional labor,

notably surface acting and deep acting, alter employees' emotional and psychological states. This alteration influences job satisfaction through a mechanism of emotional transmission, which in turn impacts turnover intentions. Consequently, we posit that job satisfaction serves as a mediator in the link between emotional labor and turnover intention, demonstrating how emotional labor indirectly contributes to turnover intention by modifying job satisfaction.

Drawing on the literature review and theoretical insights, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H4: Job satisfaction acts as a mediator in the relationship between emotional labor and turnover intention, exhibiting a partial mediating effect.

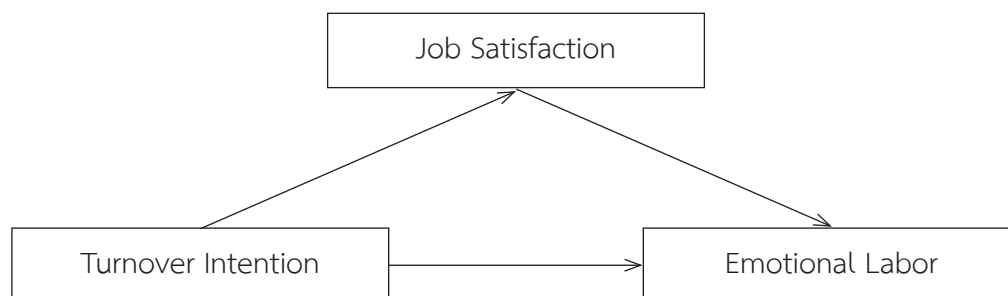


Figure 1 Theoretical Model Diagram

Methodology

Sample Selection and Data Collection

The survey targets employees of companies in Hebei Province, China, and employs questionnaire surveys, including online surveys and email surveys. In February 2024, a total of 532 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 516 were returned.

After sorting and screening, 428 valid questionnaires were obtained. These 428 valid questionnaires were obtained through different channels, including 238 via email, 190 through on-site completion. The collected survey questionnaires were subjected to Harman's single-factor analysis to test for common method bias. The analysis revealed

no significant common method bias in the survey questionnaires. The survey results were satisfactory, and the surveyed subjects were evenly distributed in terms of gender, age, education level, position, and length of service, indicating strong representativeness of the sample.

Scale Selection and Variable Measurement

This study employed established scales to measure the research variables. The Emotional Labor Scale was adapted from Diefendor (2005), consisting of 14 items categorized into surface acting, deep acting, and genuine emotional expression. The Job Satisfaction Scale, based on Zeng (2013) and revised from Bakker (2008), comprised 5 items assessing job satisfaction across five dimensions, including statements like “I am very satisfied with my current job”. The Turnover Intent Scale, adapted from Weng and Xi (2013) and based on Mobley et al. (1978), consisted of 4 items measuring turnover intention across four dimensions, such as “I often feel bored with my current job and think about switching to another organization”.

The Reliability and Validity of the Scales

In this research, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were employed to evaluate the reliability of the scales measuring emotional labor, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. Both Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) were implemented to verify the validity of these scales. The reliability tests revealed high

internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha values surpassing established standards, confirming the scales’ capacity to measure the constructs consistently and accurately. In terms of validity, EFA was used to determine the logical structuring of the scales, while CFA confirmed the strength of this structure, ensuring accurate differentiation among the various research variables.

Results

The Test of Correlation between Variables

Using SPSS 16.0 software, Pearson correlation coefficients were determined to analyze the interrelationships among variables. The analysis revealed significant negative correlations between deep acting and surface acting. In contrast, significant positive correlations were found between deep acting and genuine emotional expression, and significant negative correlations between surface acting and genuine emotional expression. Furthermore, the results showed significant positive correlations between deep acting and job satisfaction, while significant negative correlations were observed between surface acting and job satisfaction, and significant positive correlations between genuine emotional expression and job satisfaction. These findings indicate that each dimension of emotional labor significantly influences job satisfaction, thereby supporting hypothesis H2. Additionally, deep acting exhibited significant negative correlations with turnover intention, surface acting

showed significant positive correlations, and genuine emotional expression displayed significant negative correlations with turnover intention. Each dimension of emotional labor was significantly linked to turnover intention, supporting hypothesis H1. Lastly,

job satisfaction was significantly negatively correlated with turnover intention, affirming that job satisfaction substantially diminishes turnover intention, which corroborates hypothesis H3.

Table 1 Variable Correlation Analysis (N = 428)

Variable	M	S.D.	Deep Acting	Surface Acting	Genuine Expression	Job Satisfaction	Turnover Intention
Deep Acting	3.239	1.086	1				
Surface Acting	2.479	0.933	-0.509**	1			
Genuine Expression	3.118	1.027	0.582**	-0.409**	1		
Job Satisfaction	3.021	1.038	0.621**	-0.506**	0.642**	1	
Turnover Intention	2.581	1.015	-0.573**	0.657**	-0.383**	-0.527**	1

Note: ** indicates significant correlation at the 0.010 level (two-tailed)

The findings from hierarchical regression models reveal that deep acting significantly reduces turnover intention, evidenced by a regression coefficient of -0.573 at the 0.010 significance level, thus validating hypothesis H1a. Similarly, deep acting enhances job satisfaction significantly, indicated by a regression coefficient of 0.621 at the same significance level, supporting hypothesis H2a. Additionally, binary regression analysis of deep acting and job satisfaction on turnover intention produced coefficients of -0.316 and -0.279, respectively. Both coefficients are significant and non-zero, suggesting that job satisfaction acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between deep acting and turnover intention, which lends partial support to hypothesis H4.

At the 0.010 significance level, surface acting significantly increases turnover intention, as indicated by a regression coefficient of 0.657, thereby validating hypothesis H1b. In a similar vein, surface acting adversely affects job satisfaction, with a regression coefficient of -0.506 at the same significance level, supporting hypothesis H2b. Further, binary regression analysis of surface acting and job satisfaction influencing turnover intention resulted in regression coefficients of 0.526 and -0.241, respectively. Both coefficients are significant and non-zero, suggesting that job satisfaction serves as a partial mediator between surface acting and turnover intention, offering partial support for hypothesis H4.

At the 0.010 significance level, genuine emotional expression exhibits a significant

negative influence on turnover intention, with a regression coefficient of -0.383, which meets the criteria for testing mediation effects and supports hypothesis H1c. Regarding the relationship between genuine emotional expression and job satisfaction, regression analysis indicates a coefficient of 0.642, also at the 0.010 significance level. Additionally, the fit indices for the model are favorable, demonstrating a significant negative impact of genuine emotional expression on job satisfaction, thus confirming hypothesis H2c. These results allow us to move forward with the mediation effect analysis.

Finally, the binary regression analysis for genuine emotion expression and job

satisfaction on turnover intention shows that the regression coefficient for genuine emotion expression is -0.197, not significant ($P = 0.075$), while the regression coefficient for job satisfaction is significant and negative ($B = -0.258, p < 0.010$). According to Wen and Ye (2014), when the regression coefficient of the independent variable changes to a nonsignificant level, it indicates that the mediating variable plays a complete mediation effect. Therefore, we infer that job satisfaction plays a fully mediating role in bridging the relationship between genuine emotion expression and turnover intention, confirming hypothesis H4.

Table 2 Mediation Variable Hierarchical Regression Analysis Results (N = 428)

Categories of Variables	Job Satisfaction	Turnover Intention		Job Satisfaction	Turnover Intention		Job Satisfaction	Turnover Intention	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Antecedent Variables									
Deep Acting	0.597**	-0.538**	-0.316**						
Surface Acting				-0.557**	0.705**	0.526**			
Genuine Expression							0.505**	-0.391**	-0.197
Mediating Variable									
Job Satisfaction			-0.279**			-0.241**			-0.258**
R ²	0.472	0.398	0.426	0.296	0.537	0.566	0.365	0.209	0.349
Adj R ²	0.466	0.391	0.409	0.285	0.531	0.557	0.356	0.198	0.331
F value	38.546**	31.713**	26.091**	37.153**	43.788**	37.049**	32.395**	13.277**	18.632**

Note: ** Indicates significant correlation at the 0.010 level (two-tailed)

Discussion

Direct Effects of Various Forms of Emotional Labor. This research confirms the direct and positive influence of emotional labor on employees' turnover intention. Specifically, surface acting and deep acting both significantly impact employees' decisions to remain with or depart from their organization. These findings align with previous studies by Li and Peng (2018) and Xie et al. (2023), further emphasizing the crucial role of emotional labor in influencing employees' turnover intentions. Additionally, authentic emotional expressions were found to play a critical role, indicating that genuine emotional engagement can significantly affect turnover decisions.

Mediating Role of Job Satisfaction. The study comprehensively examines how job satisfaction mediates the relationship between emotional labor and turnover intention. The results identify job satisfaction as a pivotal mediator, demonstrating that higher levels of job satisfaction can mitigate the adverse effects of emotional labor on turnover intention. This observation is consistent with the findings of Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) and He et al. (2020). Specifically, the study reveals that job satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between surface and deep acting and turnover intention, while fully mediating the relationship between genuine emotional expression and turnover intention.

Development and Validation of a Theoretical Model. This research successfully develops and validates a theoretical model

delineating the dynamics between emotional labor, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. The hierarchical mediation regression model employed confirms the direct effects of emotional labor on turnover intention and elucidates the mediating role of job satisfaction. The successful validation of this model provides novel insights into the factors driving employee turnover and establishes a robust theoretical foundation for future research and practical applications.

Based on these findings, the study proposes specific management strategies and developmental recommendations for employees. It underscores the importance of effectively managing emotional labor to reduce turnover intention. Given the mediating role of job satisfaction, it is recommended that managers cultivate a supportive work environment, encourage deep emotional adjustments and genuine emotional expressions among employees, and implement initiatives to enhance job satisfaction.

Conclusions

1. An analysis of the impact of various emotional labor strategies—surface acting, deep acting, and genuine emotion expression—on employee turnover intention revealed that these strategies distinctly affect employees' decisions to remain with or depart from an organization. Specifically, deep acting correlated negatively with turnover intention, while surface acting showed a positive correlation, and genuine emotion expression

also demonstrated a negative correlation.

2. The study identified the mediating role of job satisfaction in the dynamics between emotional labor and turnover intention. Job satisfaction was found to partially mediate the effects of surface acting and deep acting on turnover intention, and to fully mediate the effect of genuine emotion expression.

3. A comprehensive theoretical model was constructed linking emotional labor, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. The validation of this model has provided significant theoretical and empirical contributions to the field, establishing a solid foundation for future research.

4. Given these findings, it is advised that managers deepen their comprehension and handling of emotional labor to reduce turnover intention. Specifically, fostering a supportive work environment and encouraging both deep emotional adjustments and genuine emotional expressions can enhance job satisfaction, subsequently reducing turnover intention and improving employee retention and performance.

Recommendation

Theoretical Development Recommendation

Based on emotional labor theory, it is recommended to further explore the multidimensional impacts of emotional labor strategies, including their applicability and effectiveness in different cultural, industry, and organizational contexts. Additionally, there is a suggestion to deepen the research

on the relationship between emotional labor and organizational change to enhance the explanatory and predictive power of emotional labor theory, providing theoretical support for organizational change management.

Practical Application Recommendation

Based on emotional labor theory, businesses can implement emotional labor management training to help employees understand the concept, importance, and skills of emotional labor. This includes training in emotional self-management, expression skills, etc., to enhance employees' awareness and coping abilities regarding emotional labor.

By fostering a supportive organizational culture, including an open communication atmosphere and a value for respecting employees' emotional expression, companies can create a work environment conducive to promoting genuine emotional expression and deep emotional regulation. This helps enhance employees' job satisfaction and reduces their turnover intention.

Managers should provide personalized emotional labor support based on individual employee characteristics and workplace needs. This includes adopting different emotional management strategies for different employees, such as providing more emotional regulation resources or flexible work arrangements, to enhance employees' engagement and satisfaction with their work.

Companies should regularly collect feedback and opinions from employees on emotional labor strategies and adjust and optimize them based on the feedback results.

This helps maintain the effectiveness and adaptability of emotional labor management measures and increases employees' sense of identification and loyalty to the organization.

Future Research Direction Recommendation

While this research offers insightful findings, it is not without its limitations. Initially, the study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality between emotional labor, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. Future studies might benefit from employing longitudinal designs to more accurately

delineate these causal relationships. Additionally, while this study concentrated on the mediating role of job satisfaction, further research could investigate other potential mediators, such as organizational support or the psychological capital of employees. Moreover, the sample used in this study was restricted to a specific geographic region and industry. Future studies should consider incorporating a more varied sample to broaden the generalizability and applicability of the results.

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Name and Surname: Xiaobo Xu

Highest Education: Doctor of Philosophy (Business Administration),
Dhurakij Pundit University

Affiliation: Dhurakij Pundit University

Field of Expertise: Human Resource Management