



## Behavioral Consequence of Emotional Masking: The Cost of Surface Acting Emotional Labor on Self-Control

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**Abstract:** Encountering hostile clients among customer service roles is common. Their job role demands expected emotional adjustment called emotional labor. They employ a particular type of emotional labor, called surface acting emotional labor (SAEL), when they wear an emotional mask to hide what one truly feels in a situation to show a different desirable emotion. In the strength model of self-control, SAEL is considered a resource-depleting task. It is assumed that some limited resource gets depleted when one engages in overriding inner responses for an overarching goal. SAEL as a resource-depleting emotional labor is predicted to negatively affect subsequent unrelated resource-depleting tasks. However, some individuals get mentally fatigued faster than others. This individual difference in rate of resource depletion is called depletion sensitivity (DS). In this paper, I examined whether surface acting emotional labor predicts self-control as manifested by typically controlled tempting behavior, compulsive buying (CB) through individual differences in depletion sensitivity. A total of 116 customer service employees answered an online survey measuring emotional labor, depletion sensitivity, and recent compulsive buying behavior with acceptable to excellent internal consistency reliability. Results from mediation analysis showed that SAEL has no direct, but has an indirect relationship with CB, mediated by DS. The findings suggest that the maladaptive emotional regulation in the workplace promotes poor self-control, specifically shopping behavior, through individual difference in depletion sensitivity. The strength model of self-control is supported. Future studies may look into the role of implicit theories of self-control for intervention.

**Key Words:** emotional labor; surface acting emotional labor; self-control; depletion sensitivity

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Customer service employees encounter hostility from clients. Their job role involves emotional adjustment which is called emotional labor. On the

one hand, the surface acting is a type of emotional labor in which an employee wears an emotional mask to fulfill the role of the job. On the other hand, deep acting refers to emotional labor in which the employee tries to genuinely feel the desired emotion (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Vast literature consistently



shows that surface acting emotional labor has a detrimental effect on well-being (e.g. Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). The adverse impact corroborates to the strength model of self-control (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice 1998; Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; De Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012, Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998), which posits that individuals have limited resources that when initially depleted, hampers other subsequent albeit unrelated actions requiring self-control

Exposure to a working environment that exposes an employee to recurrent emotional labor might constantly deplete resources. In turn, habitual suppression of emotion with the use of surface acting emotion regulation is hypothesized to undermine domain-general self-control. Self-control is the ability to override inner responses like thoughts, emotions, and behavior, usually to control undesirable behavioral tendencies according to overarching goals. Poor self-control is related to negative outcomes in life such as bad adjustment, pathology, poorer academic performance, and interpersonal relationships (Tangney, Baumeister., & Boone, 2004). Even so, individuals may deplete resources at different rates in consequence of a resource depleting task, also referred to as depletion sensitivity (Salmon, Adriaanse, Vet, Fennis, & Ridder, 2014). Although there are different views of self-control, the scope of this study is to provide evidence in testing whether a particular emotion regulation strategy in the workplace that is believed to be resource depleting can have distal behavioral consequences.

The different views of self-control with the distinction of the motivational processes such as motivated task-switching (Inzlicht, Schmeichel, & Macrae, 2014), a broader hierarchy of goals (Fujita, 2011), and effort threshold involved in specific tasks (VanDellen, Hoyle, & Miller, 2012) are not the focal point of the study. Specifically, this study aims to test whether customer service employees who habitually suppress their emotion in the workplace by engaging in surface acting emotional labor will have poorer self-control as manifested by decreased inhibition to typically resisted desires such as shopping. More importantly, the association between surface acting emotional labor and shopping behavior is tested

whether it is facilitated by their individual differences in depletion sensitivity.

### *1.1 Emotion regulation in the workplace*

Emotion regulation as a role in a job, known as emotional labor (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983) has been shown to have maladaptive effects. From the viewpoint of the strength model of self-control, regulating emotion that is incongruent to what one truly feels is effortful and is resource-depleting (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Surface acting is demonstrated to predict a negative impact on employee's well-being, especially on jobs that have an inevitable encounter with hostile behaviors such as in customer service roles (Grandey, Tam, & Brauburger, 2002). In practicing surface acting emotional labor, one shall follow a job-prescribed emotion display. Surface acting is a response-focused emotion regulation according to the process model (Gross, 1998). Suppressing behavioral expression of emotion not only has cognitively depleting consequences (Richards & Gross, 2000) but also has an emotional impact such as burnout (Andela, Truchot, & Borteyrou, 2015).

The impact of regulating emotion is proposed to have a distal impact on behavior (Aldao & Christensen, 2015). Its consequence may not only be limited to occupational health but may later extend to other behavioral domains requiring self-control. The regulation of emotion has been shown to deplete self-control resources and later affected self-regulatory behaviors. This is in line with the strength model of self-control which posits that some limited resource is depleted after engaging in an earlier resource depleting task that consequently diminishes subsequent task performance (Baumeister et al., 1998; Muraven et al., 1998). To illustrate that the distal impact of emotion regulation is in line with the strength model of self-control, a diary study that took place in several months found that experiencing mere temptation alone makes people feel mentally fatigued, and consequently became a barrier in their self-regulatory goal attainment (Milyavskaya & Inzlicht, 2017).

The role of temptation is inherent in the inhibitory view of self-control. For self-control to be



engaged, the desire for the behavior is necessary to create internal conflict. According to Hofmann & Dillen (2012a), desire takes precedence which creates conflict against a competing goal representation for the self-control to be necessary (Hofmann, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2012b). The desire that is competing against an alternative goal creates an internal conflict in which both compete for attentional resources in the working memory. Internal conflict is necessary for the temptation to take place. Without temptation, there is no need for effortful control that will deplete one's resources. Individuals who are in a limited resource state would report an increase in unsuccessful self-control or more frequent indulgence to tempting behaviors. As reported by an experience-sampling study (Hoffman et al., 2012b), spending is one of the most common desires that is usually controlled or is not being acted upon. Since spending behavior is typically down-regulated by employing self-control, then we shall expect that the resource-depleted individuals will report poorer control in spending behavior. Hence, customer service employees who employ surface acting emotional labor which depletes people cognitively and emotionally will have the tendency to spend more.

However, some individuals experience mental fatigue more easily than others (Salmon, et al., 2014). The impact of maladaptive emotional labor on self-control may be explained by the individual difference in terms of rate in resource depletion, also known as depletion sensitivity. Referring to their definition, depletion sensitivity "reflects the rate at which resources are drained as a result of self-control demanding task requirements" (p.2). According to this view, some individuals may deplete their self-control resources much faster than others when put in a resource depleting situation. Some individuals get easily depleted, while others can endure better.

Surface acting emotional labor as a response-focused emotion regulation depletes resources according to the strength model of self-control and is further explained by the tendency to be highly influenced by a resource depleting task. Overall, I hypothesize that surface acting emotional labor will predict spending behavior through depletion sensitivity. The customer service employees who habitually wear an emotional mask as part of their job

will report higher spending behavior as explained by their individual difference in depletion sensitivity. Using mediation analysis, the indirect relationship between surface acting emotional labor and compulsive buying behavior as explained by depletion sensitivity serves as evidence to support the strength model of self-control where the maladaptive emotion regulation in the workplace has distal consequences in self-control behavior.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This is a cross-sectional online survey. Participants accomplished an informed consent form. Data validation question items were included to assess willful participation.

### 2.1 Participants

To proceed in answering the survey, the respondents must identify themselves to be in a customer service role first. Those who affirm with questions, "Does your role require ensuring customer/client satisfaction with a product or service?" and "Do you deal with and help resolve any customer/client complaints?" can proceed with the questionnaire items. A total of 116 employees participated in this study. One case was removed due to questionable response patterns (i.e. uniform answers), seven cases with incomplete responses were removed. The remaining respondent cases are 108 in total. Their work is mostly in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry ( $n=104$ ), three from Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), and one from the medical industry. Most are adults with a mean age of 28.6 ( $SD = 5.40$ ) and 62% were females ( $n=62$ ).

### 2.2 Materials

Emotional Labor (ELS; Brotheridge & Lee, 2003) is measured using a 15-item self-report questionnaire that measures six facets of emotional display in the workplace, including the frequency, intensity, and variety of emotional display, the duration of interaction, and surface and deep acting. The surface acting emotional labor (ELS-SAEL) is



measured with three items such as "I hide my true feelings about a situation." In this study, only the surface acting emotional labor was used, with an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .71$ .

Depletion Sensitivity (DSS; Salmon et al., 2014) is measured using an 11-item 7-point Likert scale. Each item is composed of resource depleted situation, followed by a statement about the experience of depletion. A sample item includes, "After I exerted a lot of mental effort, I need to take a rest first before I can do another complicated task" ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

To measure compulsive spending behavior, I used the Edwards Compulsive Buying Scale-Revised (ECBS-R; Maraz et al., 2015). Compulsive buying is a maladaptive behavior or preoccupation with buying or shopping that results in social and financial difficulties. Convergent and divergent validity was observed against other measures (McElroy et al., 1994). A sample item includes "I shop and spend even when I don't need anything" ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In operational terms in this study, respondents with higher scores in ELS-SAEL will predict higher scores in ECBS-R as mediated by DSS. The age and biological sex, single civil status, and night shift status were included in the model as covariates. Biological sex, single civil status, and night shift status were dummy coded to '1' for females, '1' for singles, '1' for night-shift status, and '0' for others.

The normality assumptions were assessed and the data met the characteristics required in conducting parametric analysis. Bivariate correlation results show that females and singles reported higher frequency of compulsive buying (CB),  $r = .22$ ,  $p = .020$  and  $r = .19$ ,  $p = .049$  respectively. Older employees reported lower scores in surface acting emotional labor (SAEL),  $r = -.20$ ,  $p = .039$ . The demographics influence the relationship of the target variables and therefore are considered as covariates in the mediation model. As expected relevant to the hypothesis, those who reported more frequent use of surface acting emotional labor (SAEL) tends to feel more mentally drained (DS),  $r = .27$ ,  $p = .005$ , and those who are more mentally drained reported greater compulsive shopping (CB),  $r = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ . There is

no correlation however, between the SAEL and CB ( $r = .15$ ,  $p = .132$ ).

I tested for a mediation effect of depletion sensitivity between surface acting emotional labor and compulsive buying. The mediation model follows the strength model of self-control where the sensitivity to experience mental fatigue explains the negative consequence of maladaptive emotional labor on resisting the typically controlled desire: shopping. The depletion sensitivity, but not the surface acting emotional labor has a direct relationship with compulsive buying ( $b = .42$ ,  $t(100) = 4.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In modeling mediation analysis according to Shrout and Bolger (2002), the X (SAEL) does not necessarily need to predict Y (CB). But the relationships between X (SAEL) to M (DS), and M (DS) to Y (CB) have to both exist. The results show that the surface acting emotional labor predicted depletion sensitivity (X to M:  $b = .48$ ,  $t(101) = 3.21$ ,  $p < .01$ , 5,000 bootstrap 95% CI: .18 to .77) and depletion sensitivity predicted compulsive buying (M to Y:  $b = .42$ ,  $t(100) = 4.72$ ,  $p < .001$ , 5,000 bootstrap 95% CI: .24 to .60). These associations are necessary in testing mediation effects.

The scores derived from the ELS-SAEL and the DSS explains the 13% of the variance of the ECBS-R score,  $F(5, 101) = 2.99$ ,  $p < .01$ . The indirect effect of surface acting emotional labor on compulsive buying via depletion sensitivity was tested using SPSS INDIRECT macro to test bootstrapping models with 5,000 samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). As predicted, the mediation analysis shows that the surface acting emotional labor has an indirect relationship with compulsive buying through the depletion sensitivity ( $b = .20$ ,  $SE = .10$ , 5,000 bootstrap 95% CI: .03 to .42). To test for the significance of the indirect effect results in the Sobel's (1982) test suggest that the mediation effect is significant,  $Z = 2.65$ ,  $p < .01$ . See Figure 1 for details.



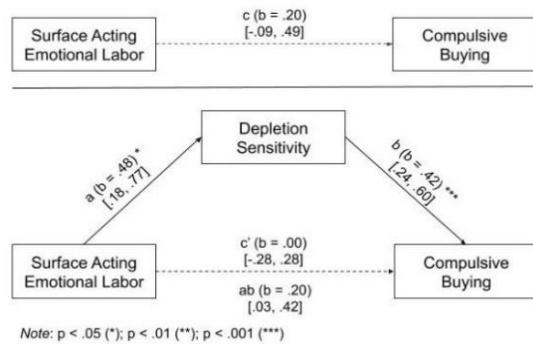


Fig. 1. Mediation diagram of the effect of surface acting emotional labor on compulsive buying with depletion sensitivity as mediator

Following the strength model of self-control, the results support the hypothesis that employing greater surface acting emotional labor is associated, albeit indirectly, with poorer control to impulses that are typically easy to overcome. Since the customer service employees are constantly exposed to an environment that demands a restricted affective expression as part of their job (i.e. emotional labor), the negative implication of maladaptive emotional labor strategy also has a non-occupational behavioral impact, particularly in shopping behavior.

These findings are in line with the literature demonstrating that response-focused emotion regulation such as the surface acting emotional labor takes its cognitive toll (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Richards & Gross, 2000) specifically on self-control (e.g. Bruyneel, Dewitte, Franses, & Dekimpe, 2009) and is further explained by the tendency to be highly influenced by a resource depleting task (Salmon et al., 2014). This study supports the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998) specifically the surface acting emotional labor (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983), which is aligned from the view of strength model of self-control (Baumeister et al., 1998; Baumeister, et al., 2007; De Ridder et al., 2012; Muraven et al., 1998). The negative impact of surface acting emotional labor is not limited to organizational

behavior (Grandey et al., 2004) but is also extended to domain-specific self-control such as those tempting behaviors that are typically controlled (Hoffman et al., 2012b). Surface acting emotional labor is an under-examined antecedent of self-control since most studies are focused on the consequences (De Ridder et al., 2012).

On the one hand, organizational interventions may look into the inherent conditions of the job by considering the impact of emotional labor. Clinicians on the other hand, may look into cognitive and affective approaches. In cognitive, the antecedents of self-control and depletion sensitivity may be examined such as the role of lay theories of self-control (Job, Dweck, & Walton, 2010). The other is temporally proximal strategy such as the implementation intention for tempting situations (IIs; Gollwitzer, 1999). In affective approach, mindfulness has been suggested to help one's emotion regulation to improve self-control (Teper, Segal, & Inzlicht, 2013). The nomological network of emotional labor (e.g. Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005) may also include distal consequences in self-control behaviors.

The cross-sectional approach lacks insight in terms of the sequential development on the distal impact of poor emotion regulation. This limitation can be addressed by testing the model in a longitudinal approach. However, the ecological approach of the study provides insightful contribution to the limitations of laboratory investigations in the strength model of self-control.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The customer service employees who habitually employ surface acting emotional labor have shown poorer self-control as manifested by increased compulsive buying, as explained by their individual differences in depletion sensitivity. This study supports the process model of emotion regulation and the framework of emotional labor as a resource-depleting task in view of the strength model of self-control. Implications in organizational practice include designing interventions on customer service employees' effective emotion regulation in the workplace.



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