

# Emotional Labor Strategies And Service Performance: The Mediating Role Of Employee Creativity

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper theoretically and empirically investigates the effects of different emotional labor strategies on frontline employee creativity in the context of service industry, and it also studies the mediating role of frontline employee creativity in the relationships between frontline employee's emotional labor strategies and the two aspects of customer service performance. Based on the data of 424 employee-supervisor dyads in China, the empirical results indicate that surface acting decreases employee creativity and extra role performance, while deep acting increases employee creativity, role-prescribed performance and extra role performance; employee creativity mediates both the negative influence of surface acting on extra role performance and the positive influences of deep acting on role-prescribed and extra role performances. The results have some theoretical and practical implications on service creativity and emotion management in service industry.*

**Keywords:** Emotional Labor; Surface Acting; Deep Acting; Creativity; Role Prescribed Performance; Extra Role Performance

## INTRODUCTION

In service industry, frontline employees are of the most important factors by providing customers with colourful, positive, and memorable feelings for every consumption experience (Ekinci & Dawes, 2009; Hui, Chiu, Yu, Cheng, & Tse, 2007). Therefore, managers are gradually guiding and controlling frontline service employees' emotional display in front of customers, and are increasingly emphasizing the importance of emotional labor during service encounters (Kinman, 2009; Varca, 2009). When asked to perform emotional labor, frontline employee can choose different acting strategies (deep acting and surface acting). With deep acting strategy, employee consciously shapes his or her inner feelings to experience the desired emotions, while with surface acting strategy, employee only pretends outward displays. Prior literature shows that different emotional labor strategies may cause quite different consequences, such as employee's job stress, job burnout, job satisfaction and work withdrawal (e.g. Beal, Trougakos, Weiss, & Green, 2006; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005; Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009; Johnson & Spector, 2007). Recently, scholars are trying to explore the relationship between emotional labor strategies and employees' customer service performance (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2003; Little, 2007), and some of them have found different impacts of these two emotional labor strategies. However, there is little research pay attention to the mediating role of frontline employee creativity in the relationships between frontline employee's emotional labour strategies and two aspects of customer service performance.

In this paper, we focus on frontline employee creativity and examine the mediating mechanism that how to transmit the effects of emotional labor strategies to customer service performance. Frontline employee creativity refers to the process that a frontline service employee generates novel and meaningful ideas to identify and meet current and potential customer needs (Coelho & Augusto, 2011). A great deal of research has convincingly demonstrated that emotions do influence employee creativity (e.g., Clore, Schwarz & Conway, 1994; Fredrikson & Joiner, 2002; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987), while the relationship between emotional labor strategies and employee creativity has not been investigated till now. We employ the cognitive resource theory to explain the proposed links between emotional labor strategies and frontline employee creativity. Considering both emotional labor and creative idea production are effortful processes, and they compete with each other for frontline employee's

limited cognitive resources (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), emotional labor strategy partly decides the amount of cognitive resources that a frontline employee could devote to creative idea production. Thus emotional labor strategies are supposed to have effect on frontline employee creativity and these effects could be transferred to customer service performance, and previous study has documented that employee creativity is positively related to employee job performance (Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009). Therefore, since previous work has not addressed the issue about the mediating mechanism between emotional labor strategies and service performance, frontline service employee creativity may play an important role in transmitting the effects of emotional labor strategies to customer service performance.

In addition, when studying the impacts of emotional labor strategies on customer service performance, prior research did not distinct the role-prescribed performance and extra-role performance (Ashforth et al., 1993; Grandey, 2003; Little, 2007), thus providing an incomplete understanding of how emotional labor affects the different aspects of customer service performance. In the customer-service context, role-prescribed performance involves frontline employees' expected behaviour that is prescribed as formal job requirements, and extra-role performance refers to frontline employees' discretionary behaviour that extends beyond the formal job requirements. It is necessary to classify the two aspects of customer service performance in the complex and dynamic service system, which is because creating a pleasant service consumption experience not only depends on frontline employees' essential behaviours that are directly related to efficiency, but also depends on their customer-focused OCB (Organizational Citizenship Behaviours) beyond prescribed work roles. Thus, both role-prescribed and extra role performance are decisive factors for successful service delivery, and the classification of them helps to predict customer service performance more precisely.

In this study, we aim to develop the research about emotional labor by investigating the role of frontline employee creativity in transmitting the effects of emotional labor strategies on customer service performance and by examining this issue on both the role-prescribed performance and the extra role performance. Based on the literature on emotional labor and employee creativity, we develop the theories about the influences of emotional labor strategies on frontline employee creativity and the mediating effects of frontline employee creativity between emotional labor strategies and two aspects of customer service performance. The combination of these theories produces a mediator model, which was tested based on the data obtained from 424 employee-supervisor dyads in 84 Chinese local restaurants.

This paper contributes to the current literature in several aspects. Firstly, we theoretically and empirically analyze the effect of different emotional labor strategies on frontline employee creativity, extending the consequences of emotional labor to employee creativity. Secondly, we emphasize the mediating role of employee creativity in the relationship between emotional labor strategies and customer service performance, and explore the pathway of how emotional labor strategies exert their effects. Thirdly, we focus on both role-prescribed customer service performance and extra role customer service performance, providing a more nuanced understanding about the impacts of emotional labor strategies on different aspects of customer service performance. Practical implications are also discussed in this paper.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

### **Emotional Labor Strategies and Employee Creativity**

Creativity means the generation of ideas that are both novel and meaningful (Amabile, 1996, Gong, et al., 2009). In service context, frontline employee creativity is exhibited in producing novel solution to customer problem, in dealing with complaints creatively, and in suggesting for new procedures, etc. To deploy those creative efforts, frontline employee needs enough cognitive resources to develop their creative-relevant and domain-relevant skills (Amabile, 1996).

Based on the cognitive perspective on emotional labor, although both surface acting and deep acting could display a desired emotion, they involve different cognitive emotion management processes, and are not equally efficient in the consumption of cognitive resources which are available in the generation of creative ideas during service encounters (e.g., Gross, 1998; Gross, et al., 1997; Gross, et al., 2009). Thus, deep acting and surface acting may have different influences on frontline employee creativity.

Surface acting happens relatively late in the cognitive emotion regulation processes without reappraise of the situation or environment just as response-focused emotion regulation. Frontline service employees just fake outward emotional displays without changing their inner feelings about the work environment, thus, during service encounter, they must monitor their emotional expression cues from moment to moment in order to alter their exhibited emotions according to the display rules, and repeat this regulatory processes again and again. The monitoring and faking of their external expressions and the suppressing of their genuine feelings cost frontline employee large amount of cognitive resource which could be invested into the development of creative-relevant and domain-relevant skills to generate novel and useful ideas about customer service. Without enough cognitive resources to develop creative-relevant and domain-relevant skills during service encounter, frontline service employee using surface acting could hardly generate creative ideas. Richards and Gross (2000) argued that surface acting may require employees to invest more cognitive resources, which could impair their cognitive performance even if the customers are not aware that the employees are engaging in surface acting. Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) also suggests that surface acting consumes valuable cognitive resources to constantly self-monitor and self-correct during service encounters. Thus, without prior reappraisal of the service context or usage of emotional memories, emotion management processes of surface acting compete cognitive resources with frontline employees' creative tasks and impair their employee creativity.

Deep acting makes frontline service employees reappraise their service environment and regulate their external emotion through changing their inner feelings at the outset. In this cognitive regulatory processes, they don't have to monitor their expressive cues of emotions and manage them from moment to moment (Gross, 2003; Gross, et al., 2009). Thus, frontline employees using deep acting have enough cognitive resources to develop their creative-relevant and domain-relevant skills which are necessary for the improvement of employee creativity. Generally speaking, after changing their perceived individual–environment relationship, frontline employees tend to sympathize with customers and become more willing to find creative solution for customer problems, and they also experience more positive emotions because their exhibited positive emotions are consistent with their inner feelings. Grandey (2003) argues that deep acting leads to positive work outcomes because there are more authentic positive emotions and fewer negative emotions with deep acting, and one of these positive outcome is creative service ideas.

Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1:** Surface acting has a negative effect on frontline employee creativity.
- H2:** Deep acting has a positive effect on frontline employee creativity.

### **Emotional Labor Strategies and Customer Service Performance**

There is evidence that deep acting and surface acting may not be equally effective in producing customer service performance (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2003; Little, 2007). Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) argue that there will be a positive relationship between emotional labor and performance as long as the emotional expressions are perceived as sincere. However, if the emotional expressions are not perceived as authentic and sincere, then emotional labor may be negatively related to performance (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, and Sideman (2002) carried out an experimental study and found that customers could distinguish faked smiles from authentic smiles of a hotel clerk, and showed more positive responses to authentic smiles. Surface acting may be more likely to be perceived as insincere because it involves faking the desired emotions, while deep acting is more likely to be perceived as sincere because it involves changing felt emotions to match the desired emotions (Grandey, 2000). With a sample of university administrative assistants, Grandey (2003) found a positive relationship between deep acting and coworker ratings of customer service performance, and a negative relationship between surface acting and customer service performance. In another study, Grandey (2002) again found a negative relationship between surface acting and customer service delivery rated by employees themselves and a positive relationship between deep acting and customer service delivery. Little (2007) found that there is a negative relationship between surface acting and customer service performance, and there is a positive relationship between deep acting and customer service performance.

In service settings, role-prescribed customer service performance refers to the expected behaviors of service employee (Katz and Kahn, 1978), which derive from explicit norms in the service firms or from job descriptions and performance evaluation standards (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003). Commonly, role-prescribed behaviors are organizationally specified as a formal part of an individual's role or job. For a frontline service

employee, role-prescribed customer service performance refers to legitimate aspects of frontline service job performance, such as helping, serving, and courtesy.

Extra role customer service performance refers to service employees' discretionary behaviors that extend beyond the formal job descriptions (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Doney and Cannon (1997) argue that duties performed beyond the work roles prescribed by the service firm may be attributed to the employee's good intentions and his or her commitment to the customer. Although those acts are not specifically assigned to individuals as activities to be performed as part of their job, they are of great importance to successful service delivery. For a frontline service employee, extra role customer service performance requires service employees contribute to service excellence by going beyond the call of their duties to help customers.

The literature review shows that the emotional labor strategies of frontline service employees do affect customer service performance without a distinction of role-prescribed customer service performance and extra-role customer service performance. In our study, we analyze the relationships between different emotional labor strategies and the two aspects of customer service performance and argue that deep acting and surface acting affect role-prescribed customer service performance and extra-role customer service performance because they enhance/decrease the perceived affection (Grandey, 2003) and the commitment of a high-quality service delivery of frontline service employees (Bettencourt, Gwinner, & Meuter, 2001).

Though both surface and deep acting display positive emotions, the perceived authenticity of emotional displays under the two acting strategies are distinct. Deep acting changes frontline service employees' internal feelings so that the displayed expressions, such as smile, are perceived as authentic. Frontline service employees regulate their internal feelings in line with the external expression. Conversely, frontline service employees using surface acting have to fake their expressions to comply with display rules, thus they may be consciously inauthentic. The perceived authenticity of emotional displays is crucial to both role-prescribed and extra role customer service performance (Ashforth, 1993). Some researchers demonstrated that people have ability to recognize authentic emotional expressions, and they experience less positive mood and have less warm reactions to faked smiles than authentic ones (Frank, Ekman, & Friesen, 1993). Particularly, it is found that inauthentic smiles in the service context can be detected and negatively influence customers (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005). On one hand, the falseness of surface acting denies the sincerity and individual attention which customers consider as part of service quality, thus decreased role-prescribed customer service performance (Parasuraman et al., 1985), while the authentic enthusiasm expressed by frontline service employee with deep acting brings pleasant consumption experience for customers, thus increases role-prescribed customer service performance. On the other hand, masked with a smile using surface acting is not enough to go beyond customer's expectations, frontline service employees must service with a 'Duchenne smile', that is, an authentic smile expressed under deep acting, to deliver a high-quality service exceeding customer expectations (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005).

Furthermore, as we discussed before, deep acting inspires positive mood and high level of customer orientation (Allen, Pugh, Grandey, & Groth, 2010; Groth et al., 2009), which would enhance a frontline service employees' perceived stimuli, energy and commitment to service task, facilitating role-prescribed service performance and extra role service performance. George (1991) studied the relationship between salespeople moods and their performance in a large retailer, and found the positive mood state of frontline service employees positively influence both role-prescribed performance and extra role performance. Surface acting, in contrast, induces suppressed negative mood and low level of customer orientation (Allen, Pugh, Grandey, & Groth, 2010; Groth et al., 2009), which would demotivate frontline service employees, deplete their cognitive and social resources, and decrease their commitment for frontline service task. Although frontline service employees using surface acting may express proper facial expression, gestures, and voice tone, they are not motivated to help customers and deliver high-quality service actively, and often fail to reach the expected performance evaluation standards. Besides, frontline service employees with surface acting rarely provide supportive activity towards their co-worker, decreasing the likelihood of exceeding customers' expectations of their service consumption. Therefore, surface acting is negatively related to role-prescribed service performance and extra role service performance. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3a:** Deep acting is positively related to role-prescribed customer service performance.

**H3b:** Deep acting is positively related to extra role customer service performance.

**H4a:** Surface acting is negatively related to role-prescribed customer service performance.

**H4b:** Surface acting is negatively related to extra role customer customer service performance.

## **The Mediating Role of Employee Creativity between Emotional Labor Strategies and Customer Service Performance**

The characteristics of service—intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability—have caused many challenges in the service delivery process (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler 2006), which require frontline employees to be flexible and creative in performing their jobs (cf. Chebat & Kollias 2000). The nature of frontline service jobs implies that frontline service employees spend most of their time in dealing with customers, listening to their needs and complaints, making suggestions, assisting the customers in understanding the service content, and providing after sales service. Chebat and Kollias (2000) demonstrated that the delivery of heterogeneous services required flexible and creative scripts to satisfy the demands of each customer. Frontline employees frequently encounter heterogeneous customers with different preferences, and a great amount of creative ideas should be required to addressing their unique needs and obtain high level customer service performance (Churchill et al. 1976; Dubinsky et al. 1986). This suggests that customer service performance might be highly dependent on frontline employees' creativity.

In addition, creative frontline employees are more likely to communicate with the customer in a way that better enables him or her to discover the current and latent needs of customers, to communicate with customers in customized ways, to conceive and deliver a unique service package that more precisely satisfies customers' needs. It also follows that creative employees are more likely to provide superior customer experience and develop better relationships with customers (e.g., Coelho et al, 2011). Consequently, frontline employee creativity should be positively related to customer service performance. In support of this, Wang and Netemeyer (2004) demonstrated that salesperson's creativity was positively correlated with performance. Filipe Coelho & Sousa (2011) found that frontline service employee creativity has positive influence on customer service performance.

To achieve high level of role-prescribed performance, frontline service employees should be constantly focusing on the challenge of how to behave when interacting with customers and how to provide personalized service to customers according to customer needs (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). Chung and Schneider (2002) describe this challenge as “serving multiple masters”, an expression that emphasizes the complexity in frontline service employees' work when employees seek to serve the customers in the best way. Generation of creative ideas provides a potential for the frontline service employees to act in new and innovative ways to offer customized or personalized services to targeted customers. Thus, it is reasonable to link frontline employee creativity to role-prescribed customer service performance. Moreover, creative cognitive processes are manifested as important when frontline service employees try to show high extra role customer performance (Gadrey et al., 1994). Csikszentmihalyi (1999) theorizes that frontline employees who lack creativity in his or her interactions with customers are limited in performing extra role behaviour. Moreover, frontline employees who minimally engage in creative process are conceived as routine or standard and contribute little to serving customers in the ways that extend beyond the formal role requirements of their positions. In contrast, it is likely that frontline employees who participate in creative process and produce creative ideas may elicit strong customer responses by delivering service in an eye-catching and unexpected way, improving service quality by adding novel and useful details. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H5a:** Frontline employee creativity is positively related to role-prescribed customer service performance.

**H5b:** Frontline employee creativity is positively related to extra role customer service performance.

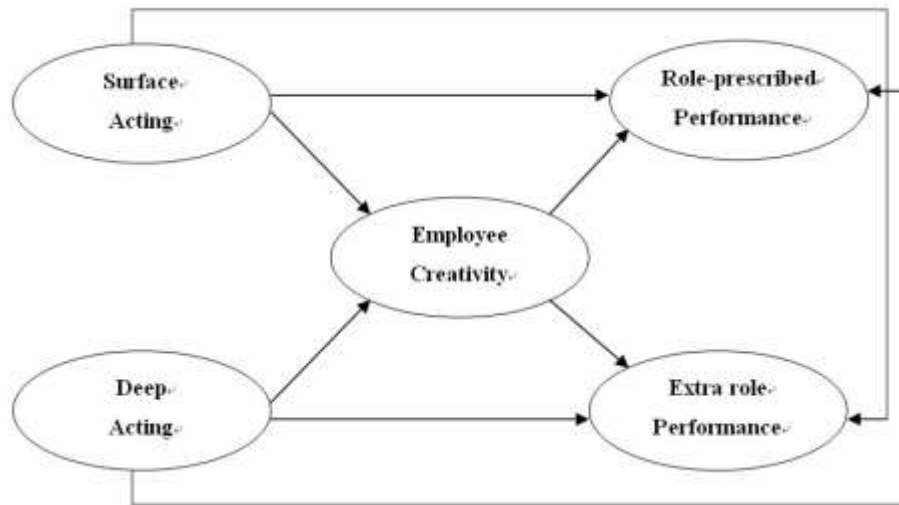
Previous studies have provided some evidence to explain the direct relationship between emotional labor strategies and customer service performance, however, the relationship is far away from being articulated without a mediating mechanism to be uncovered. The improvement of frontline employees' customer service performance needs creativity which is affected by emotional labor strategies they use. Our research first analyzes the influences of emotional labor strategies on employee creativity, and then articulates the effects of employee creativity on customer service performance, thus suggesting a mediating role of frontline employee creativity in the relationship between emotional labor strategies and customer service performance. Till now, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H6a:** Frontline employee creativity mediates the positive influence of deep acting on role-prescribed customer service performance.

**H6b:** Frontline employee creativity mediates the positive influence of deep acting on extra role customer service performance.

- H7a:** Frontline employee creativity mediates the negative influence of surface acting on role-prescribed customer service performance.
- H7b:** Frontline employee creativity mediates the negative influence of surface acting on extra role customer service performance.

Based on the above discussion, emotional labor strategies influences two aspects of customer service performance (role-prescribed performance and extra role performance) through affecting frontline employee creativity, the relationship in the conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**

## **METHODS**

### **Sample and Procedures**

The present research was conducted in 84 local restaurants in China. Increased competition in the catering industry has put great pressure on catering enterprises to become more cost-effective, to provide customized and innovative services to customers, to respond quickly and effectively to customers’ demand, which makes emotional labor become part of the frontline service employee’s work, and makes frontline employee’s creativity a key factor in meeting various customer needs. So it is appropriate for us to study the effects of emotional labor strategies on frontline employee creativity and customer service performance in this industry.

The research comprises two stages. In the first stage, we randomly selected 857 employees and 215 immediate supervisors of the employees and invited them to participate in our research. We explained our research purpose and assured them the research’s anonymity and confidentiality. Finally, 713 employees and 208 immediate supervisors agreed to join our research. We assigned each employee a survey containing questions about their emotional labor strategies and their demographic profile, such as gender, age, tenure etc. In the next month, we informed the employees to complete the survey with two-round reminders (calls and e-mails). A month later, we started the stage 2, we collected surveys from the selected employees and asked the employees’ immediate supervisors to rate each employee’s creativity and overall job performance. Eventually, we received 424 completed surveys from employee-supervisor dyads during the data collection period of approximately five weeks (59% response rate). The employee sample comprised 48% male and compared with 52% female, with a mean age of 29.9 years (SD = 4.4) and a mean job tenure of 4.5 years (SD = 2.3). The supervisor sample comprised 58% male, with a mean age of 36.2 years (SD = 8.4) and a mean job tenure of 7.8 years (SD = 2.5).

### **Measures**

All of the survey instruments were administered in Chinese, which was the language spoken by the respondents, most of the measurement items of the constructs were adapted with back translation from

well-established instruments in previous studies. Individuals responded to each item on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “1 = completely disagree” to “7 = completely agree”.

*Surface Acting/Deep Acting*

The surface acting and deep acting scales used in this study were developed by Diefendorff et al. (2005). The surface acting scale consisted of seven items, and the deep acting scale consisted of four items. The cronbach’s alpha coefficient for surface acting was 0.91, and for deep acting it was 0.86.

*Employee Creativity*

We used the scale developed by Gong, Huang, and Farh (2009) to measure employee creativity, and made some adjustment according to the service context and Chinese culture. There are seven items to measure employee creativity. The cronbach’s alpha coefficient for employee creativity was 0.90.

*Service Performance*

The service performance scale used in the research was developed by Bettencourt and Brown (1997), which is consisted of two aspects, namely extra-role and role-prescribed customer service performance respectively. Both the role-prescribed customer service performance scale and the extra-role customer service performance scale were consisted of five items. The cronbach’s alpha coefficient for role-prescribed performance and extra-role performance were 0.85 and 0.84 respectively.

*Control Variables*

Drawing on prior researches (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2003; Little, 2007), we consider age, job tenure, and gender as control variables in our model. Age and job tenure are measured in years, and gender is proceeded as a dummy variable X (0 = “male”, 1 = “female”).

**RESULTS**

**Measurement Analyses**

We performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the AMOS 18.0 computer package to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of our constructs. Convergent validity is supported by the fact that the overall fit of the models is good and that all loadings are highly statistically significant (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). The CFA results showed an acceptable fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 379.78, df = 340, p < .01; CFI = .97, RMSEA = .02$ ) and the factor loading for each item on its corresponding construct was higher than .60 and there were no cross-loadings between items on any two constructs, so the convergent validity was satisfied.

After testing the convergent validity, we used the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) to assess discriminant validity of our constructs, According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the average variance shared between a construct and its measures should be greater than the variance share between the construct and other constructs in the model. As is shown in Table 1, the root AVE values on the diagonal in parentheses are greater than .50 suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and significantly greater than inter-construct correlations (the off-diagonal elements in the corresponding rows and columns), which indicates adequate discriminant validity.

**Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Square Roots of AVE of All Variables**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>s.d.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Surface acting	4.08	1.50	(0.90)				
Deep acting	3.55	1.43	0.23**	(0.89)			
Creativity	3.75	1.45	-0.38**	0.34**	(0.89)		
Role- prescribed performance	3.95	1.09	-0.10*	0.40**	0.19**	(0.83)	
Extra role performance	3.84	1.50	-0.35**	0.49**	0.50**	0.36**	(0.87)

n = 424; The root AVE values are on the diagonal in parentheses;

\*p < .05; \*\* p < .01; Two-tailed tests.

### **Common Method Variance Control**

When the perceptual measurement of dependent and independent variables come from the same source, it is very easy to have common method variance (CMV). In our study, the mediator (employee creativity) and the dependent variables (role-prescribed/extra-role customer service performance) were collected from the same source, so we had to test the common method biases between mediator and dependent variables. Common method bias was not observed as Harman's one-factor analysis led to five factors explaining 86.40 percent of the variance and the first factor explained 16.25 percent of the variance.

### **Regression Analysis**

The hypotheses are tested via ordinary least squares (OLS) regression using SPSS16.0 software. Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all variables. Table 3 reports the results of regression analyses in which employee's creativity and service performance are the dependent variables.

Since several of the constructs in our model were highly correlated, we had to review the variance inflation factors (VIFs) to assess the level of multicollinearity between the independent variables in our regression model. Chatterjee and Price (1991) suggested that multicollinearity is not severe when the largest VIF is not greater than 10 and the mean of all VIFs is not considerably more than 1. For all of our regression models, VIFs are between 1 and 2, suggesting that multicollinearity did not appear to be a substantial problem in all of our regression model.

Overall, the regression results support most of our hypotheses. Model 1 in Table 2 reports regression results with employee creativity as the dependent variable, we found that surface acting was negatively related to employee creativity ( $\beta = -0.29$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); while deep acting was positively related to employee creativity ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), so hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported.

Model 2 in Table 2 reports regression results with role-prescribed customer service performance as the dependent variable. The results showed that the relationship between surface acting and role-prescribed customer service performance was not significant ( $\beta = -0.06$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), and deep acting was positively related to role-prescribed customer service performance ( $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus hypothesis 3a was supported while hypothesis 4a was not. As we expected, the results of model 4 showed that surface acting was negatively related to extra-role customer service performance ( $\beta = -0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and deep acting was positively related to extra-role customer service performance ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus hypotheses 3b and 4b were supported.

We also expected that employee creativity would mediate the relationship between the emotional labor strategies (surface acting, deep acting) and service performance (role-prescribed / extra-role customer service performance). Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step procedure, we first examined the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable. As shown in Table 2, model 2, deep acting was positively related to role-prescribed performance, however, the relationship between surface acting and role-prescribed customer service performance was not significant. Second, as demonstrated in Table 2, model 1, a significant relationship exists between emotional labor strategies and employee creativity. Third and finally, as model 2 and model 3 in Table 2 demonstrate, the direct effect between deep acting and role-prescribe performance reduces when employee creativity was entered into the equation ( $\beta = .43$ ,  $p < .001$  vs.  $\beta = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). And the effect of employee creativity on role-prescribe performance was significant ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ), the expected mediating role of employee creativity between deep acting and role-prescribe performance was supported, thus both hypotheses 5a and 6a were supported, while hypothesis 7a was not. As the results of model 4 and model 5 showed, the previously negative, significant relationships between surface acting and extra role performance became weaker significantly when employee creativity was added to the equation ( $\beta = -.17$ ,  $p < .0001$  vs.  $\beta = -.07$ ,  $p > .1$ ), and the direct effect between deep acting and extra-role performance reduces significantly ( $\beta = .42$ ,  $p < .001$  vs.  $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), combined with the significant effect of employee creativity on extra-role performance ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), we concluded that employee creativity fully mediated the negative relationship between surface acting and extra role performance and it also partially mediated the positive relationship between deep acting and extra role performance, thus hypotheses 5b, 6b and 7b was supported.



Table 2. Result of the Standardized Regression Analysis

Predictor	Creativity		Role-Prescribed Performance		Extra-Role Performance	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Age	0.04	-0.03	-0.04	0.00	-0.01	
Tenure	-0.06*	-0.02	-0.01	-0.00	0.02	
Gender	0.04	0.00	-0.00	-0.02	-0.03	
Surface acting	-0.29***	0.06	0.09	-0.17***	-0.07	
Deep acting	0.22***	0.43***	0.41***	0.42***	0.33***	
Creativity			0.11*		0.37***	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.19	0.16	0.17	0.20	0.22	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.15	0.16	0.19	0.21	
F Value	19.66***	16.42***	14.27***	30.20***	42.29***	

n = 424; \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

## DISCUSSION

### Contribution and Theoretical Implication

In this study, several predictions about the effects of two emotional labor strategies (deep acting and surface acting) on frontline employee creativity and two aspects of customer service performance (role-prescribed performance and extra role performance), and the mediating effects of frontline employee creativity between emotional labor strategies and customer service performance were tested. The results show that most hypotheses are supported. Overall, this study has reached its expected purpose, and it has some implications and contributions to research on emotional labor domain.

First of all, our study contributes to the emotional labor literature by extending the consequences of emotional labor strategies to frontline employee creativity. Prior research about the consequences of emotional labor strategies focuses on job stress, job burnout, job satisfaction and service performance and so on (e.g. Beal, et al., 2006; Diefendorff, et al., 2005; Groth, et al., 2009; Johnson, et al., 2007), without any attention paid to creativity, we deployed the cognitive resource theory to analyze different effects of emotional labor strategies on frontline employee creativity, and empirically examined these effects. The results show that deep acting positively affects frontline employee creativity while surface acting negatively affects it.

Secondly, our study advances knowledge about the relationship between emotional labor strategy and customer service performance by analyzing and examining the mediating mechanism in the relationship. Previous researches provide evidence about the direct links between emotional labor strategies and customer service performance (e.g., Ashforth et al., 1993; Grandey, 2003; Little, 2007). However, so far, we know little about how emotional labor affects customer service performance. Our research adds to previous work by showing the role of frontline employee creativity in transmitting the effect of emotional labor strategies on customer service performance.

Furthermore, we advance knowledge about the relationship between emotional labor strategy and customer service performance by examining the effects of emotional labor strategy on both role-prescribed performance and extra role performance. The result shows that deep acting positively affects role-prescribed customer service performance and extra role customer service performance while surface acting negatively affects extra role customer service performance. This result is consistent with Grandey (2003), and Little (2007)'s conclusions about the positive influence of deep acting and the negative influence of surface acting on customer service performance. However, the supposed negative relationship between surface acting and role-prescribed performance was not supported in our study. Possible explanation is the task characteristic of frontline service employee in the restaurant industry. High level of competition in the restaurant industry pushes restaurant corporations to standardize the process of service delivery and make display rules of emotional labor more clear. These efforts help the role-prescribed task for frontline service employees become routine and less complex. Besides, some frontline service employees could perform surface acting in such a professional way that their inauthentic emotional

expressions are very difficult to be identified by customers and supervisors. Thus, adopting a surface acting strategy and displaying desired expressions without changing one's inner feelings is enough for a frontline service employee to reach the supervisor's standard about role-prescribed customer service performance, and we did not observe a significant influence of surface acting on frontline service employee's role-prescribed performance. This result implies that the effects of emotional labor strategies affect the role-prescribed performance and the extra role performance differently. Future research should distinguish the two aspects of customer service performance when they study the relationship between emotional labor and customer service performance.

### **Implications for Management**

Our findings have important implications for the management of front-line employee's emotional labor, creativity and customer service performance.

To improve frontline employee creativity and customer service performance, especially the extra role performance, deep acting other than surface acting should be encouraged. The service corporations should assign the frontline service job to employees who are willing and prone to adjust his or her inner feelings to match the required emotions by display rules. What's more, since deep acting can be learned (Morris, & Feldman, 1996), service corporations could invite some psychological experts or professional trainers to help frontline service employees master the skills and approaches of deep acting.

The mediating effect of frontline employee creativity between emotional labor strategies and customer service performance adds confidence to the encouragement of deep acting. Managers could identify whether the adjustment of emotional labor strategies exerts its influence to customer service performance by monitoring change of frontline employee creativity, to determine whether deep acting of frontline service employees need to be further stimulated.

In addition, there are also lessons to be learned regarding inspiring customer service performance by strengthening frontline service employee creativity. Previous study found that job characteristics such as employee job autonomy, variety, feedback, and identity have positive influence on front-line service employee creativity (Coelho et al., 2010), thus, service managers could strengthen frontline service employee creativity by increasing the autonomy of frontline service employees, enlarging the set of activities performed by employees to incorporate variety into frontline service, providing more task feedback. By taking these measures, frontline service employees would be motivated to develop more creative solutions to customer problems and perform better customer service performance.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are some limitations to be addressed. First, the design of the study was cross-sectional, which prohibits conclusions about causality. It is important that researchers are careful about causality and develop longitudinal designs to address this issue. Second, as our study exclusively examined the frontline service employees in local restaurant in China, we are unable to conjecture that the pathway found in this study can be applied to other service organizations, such as in the service consulting firms. A broader test of our model would be an important step for future research.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study advances theoretical and empirical understanding of the effect of different emotional labor strategies on front-line employee creativity and two aspects of customer service performance. The results presented here highlight the importance of frontline employee creativity as mediating mechanism that transmits the effect of emotional labor strategies to customer service performance in China. This study also illustrates that emotional labor strategies influences the role-prescribed customer service performance and extra role customer service performance differently through their different effects on employee creativity. We hope that this study encourages others to take a closer look at how different emotional labor strategies affect customer service performance.

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**NOTES**