

A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EMOTIONAL LABOR STRATEGIES IN PREDICTING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN SMALL- AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES

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Abstract

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This study examines the influence of emotional labor strategies on customer satisfaction in Jordanian small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with emotional intelligence (EI) serving as a moderating variable. Data from 190 customer-facing employees were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Results confirmed that deep acting has a positive influence on customer satisfaction, whereas surface acting has a negative impact. EI was found to mitigate the negative effect of surface acting, but unexpectedly, it also attenuated the positive effect of deep acting. The findings challenge the universal applicability of EI benefits, highlighting cultural particularities in service interactions. For Jordanian SMEs, prioritizing genuine emotional engagement (deep acting) in training is more critical than generic EI training.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Labor, Surface Acting, Deep Acting, SMEs

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1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing and human resources are closely interlinked. Some individuals misconstrue their interdependence, yet they are intertwined in several ways. This is mainly because improving sales is an organization's primary goal; however, to achieve this, an organization must meet its customers' needs. Meeting customer needs begins by attracting and retaining skilled workers (Alsakarneh & Shen, 2015; Alsakarneh, Sakarneh, et al., 2023). In a nutshell, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) need employees who perform their jobs well and enjoy their work to attract the target market and drive profitability (Emilisa et al., 2024). It generates emotions through the interaction of the individual with society. Such contacts and, consequently, the associated emotions can be positive or negative (Eneizan et al., 2019).

Emotions are parameters that vary among individuals and cases. They are also subject to individual competence and dispositions (Bhave & Glomb, 2016). Hochschild (1983) introduced the broader concept of emotional labor in her book, *The Managed Heart*. That is, the difference between genuine and false emotions is referred to as surface acting, which involves expressing an emotion that is not genuine and therefore does not exist (Lee & Chelladurai, 2018). Deep acting, in turn, is the strength of manifesting genuine feelings at the workplace (Alsakarneh, Al-Gharaibeh, et al., 2023; Papakonstantinou et al., 2025; Nguyen Thi & Ho Dai, 2025). In this state, a worker attempts to conform to existing emotions by forcing new emotions. Deep acting enables the employee to concentrate on the emotional expressions required in the organization. The concept of emotional labor refers to the process by which an individual employee regulates their emotions and feelings. Emotional labor, therefore, helps in meeting the need to manage emotions at the workplace. To achieve the organization's objectives, employees must remain composed and convey their emotions effectively when interacting with coworkers, managers, and customers. Personnel often express their feelings in meetings, during decision-making, and when handling customers. At times, workers have emotions but do not express them, or they experience intense emotions and express them excessively, causing trouble at the workplace. Emotional intelligence (EI) is one of the options that can help alter the attitudes and behavior of employees within the workplace who engage in emotional labor, thereby easing job stress and leading to higher job satisfaction.

The employees of the service industry need to utilize it (Gershon & Pellitteri, 2018). Employees should approach their work with a positive and cheerful attitude to serve their customers, even when they are in a bad mood or encounter problematic customers (Groth & Grandey, 2012; Kundro et al., 2022; Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2020; Zhan et al., 2021). EI strategies offer representations that enable employees to utilize EI as a trait-like ability (Ali et al., 2023; A. Zhang & Nasir, 2025). Highly emotionally intelligent employees will not use surface-acting strategies to portray the emotions most favored by the organization in their service-related interactions with their customers. Still, they

will institute deep-acting strategies (Guy & Lee, 2013). Despite the established interplay between marketing and human resources, the extant literature on emotional labor presents a significant contextual and theoretical gap. While numerous studies in Western, individualistic contexts have confirmed the direct effects of emotional labor strategies on customer satisfaction, their efficacy within the distinct socio-cultural environment of Jordanian SMEs remains underexplored. More critically, the role of EI as a moderating variable in this relationship is often ambiguously presented and typically presumed to be universally beneficial. This presumption overlooks the potential for cultural particularities, such as those found in Jordan's high-context, collectivist culture, to fundamentally alter how EI influences the outcomes of emotional labor, creating a clear lacuna in our understanding.

This study directly addresses this dual gap. Its novelty lies not only in empirically testing the direct relationships between surface/deep acting and customer satisfaction within a non-Western SME context, but also in critically investigating the complex, culturally contingent moderating role of EI. By doing so, this research challenges the overarching assumption that EI has a uniformly positive influence. It provides a more nuanced explanation of its function in service interactions, which may sometimes undermine authentic emotional engagement. Consequently, the present research aims to achieve two primary objectives by testing four specific hypotheses. First, it examines the direct effects of emotional labor strategies on customer satisfaction. Second, it investigates the moderating influence of emotional intelligence on these relationships, thereby providing a comprehensive analysis of these dynamics in the Jordanian SME sector.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on emotional labor and emotional intelligence, leading to the development of hypotheses. Section 3 details the research methodology. Section 4 presents the results of the data analysis. Section 5 discusses the findings. Section 6 provides the conclusion, implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Emotional labor and customer satisfaction

Several studies have been conducted to demonstrate the impact of emotional labor on improving the working environment for employees by reducing job stress (Grandey, 2003). However, there has been very little research on the impact of emotional labor on customer satisfaction (Groth & Esmaeilikia, 2023; Elganas & Sheppard, 2019). Quality services evaluation can influence a customer's emotional behavior through emotional labor (Lee & Kim, 2018). The emotional labor strategy of employees has a direct link to customer satisfaction, and deep acting has considerable connections to employee contributions to customers in the form of service delivery (Hur et al., 2015; Bakar et al., 2019). Customers are influenced by emotional labor due to the correlation between employee performance and customer contact (Alsakarneh et al., 2019);

Alsakarneh, Al-Gharaibeh, et al., 2023). This performance motivates customer behavior, attitude, and emotions to certain satisfaction levels (Alsakarneh et al., 2019). There is evidence that to establish customer loyalty, it is necessary to appeal to the emotions of employees, as their emotions are reflected in the growth of service quality and an improvement in customer satisfaction (Delcourt et al., 2016; Alsakarneh et al., 2019). The informal mental and behavioral analysis of employees, which satisfies their mind and behavior in terms of the expected outcomes of products or services, is ongoing, allowing employees to undergo it in their day-to-day jobs (Collier et al., 2018). There is a rise in customer satisfaction in cases where customers require high-quality services provided by employees (Makhamreh et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2016; Goodman, 2019). The social factor that amplifies customers' ability to evaluate employee service, such as their effort to meet customer needs, is the interaction between employees and customers (Esfanjani, 2024). When employees fail to like their job, the customers feel the direct (negative) results, leaving them with poor-quality services and a bad experience.

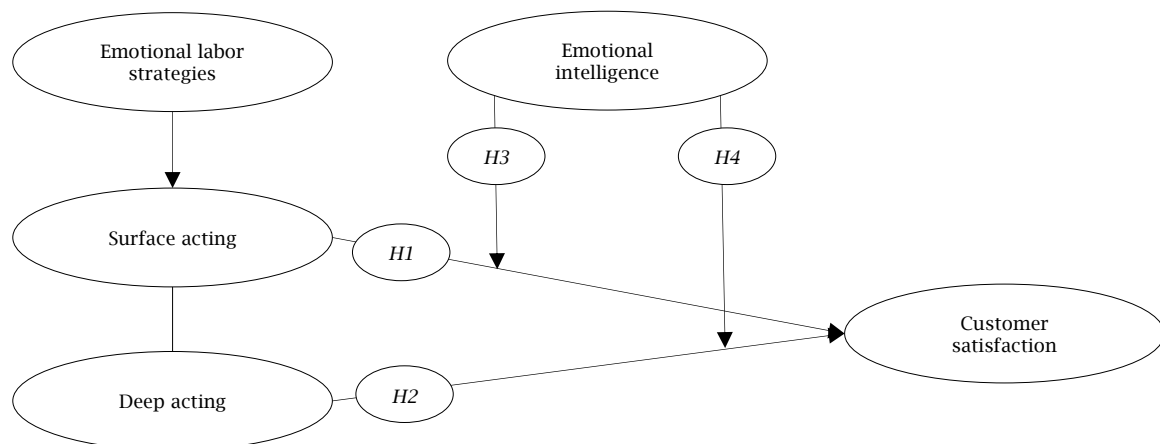
Specifically, customers who are presented with the surface or fake emotion of employees experience a high and very negative impact on their behavior, emotions, attitude, and satisfaction. Surface behaviors consist of facial expressions that customers often observe during interactions with employees and are a direct representation of how the employee will behave (Grandey, 2003). When, as part of an interaction with a customer, an employee is surface acting and conveys negative feelings, such as anger, but positive feelings, like a smile,

the customer will perceive these expressions as fake (Ghaffar et al., 2021). They translate to the fact that such an employee is acting in bad faith because they are showing no respect to the customer, which will affect the customer negatively (Alsakarneh et al., 2018). Instead, those who apply deep acting portray variant gestures when interacting with customers (Grandey, 2003; Choi & Kim, 2015). Deep acting makes the employees treat and handle customers the way they feel like doing it because the organization needs it. In Hochschild's theory (1983), the former is known as deep acting and the latter as surface acting since the former is concerned with the effort to change what is privately experienced. In contrast, the latter is involved with what is publicly presented. Deep acting indicates that the employee behaves honestly, and the customers are delighted (Diefendorff et al., 2005). Similarly, strategies for emotional labor that employees employ include the explicit manifestation of genuine emotion (deep acting) or false emotion (surface acting), which can impact customers (Alsakarneh et al., 2019). Conversely, deep acting attempts to alter the inner emotional aspect of employees by modifying antecedents, such as a situation or perception of such a situation, to express genuine emotions (Grandey, 2003; Ginanggih et al., 2023). Taking into consideration the discussed emotions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Surface acting is negatively correlated with customer satisfaction.

H2: Deep acting is positively correlated with customer satisfaction.

Figure 1. Conceptual model



2.2. Emotional intelligence as a moderator

EI, an individual's capacity to recognize their own emotions and those of others, and establish positive relationships with others, is a crucial characteristic of emotional labor (Erdirençelebi et al., 2023). Understanding emotions can help alter the attitude and behavior of employees in any SME, particularly those involved in emotional labor, to alleviate job stress and maximize customer satisfaction (Boohene et al., 2020). It is necessary for employees working in the service sector (Uribe et al., 2023). Service workers should approach customers with a pleasant

and warm demeanor, regardless of how they anticipate encountering demanding customers (Khan et al., 2024). EI strategies offer manifestations that enable employees to utilize emotional intelligence as a trait-like capability (Geng et al., 2025). Employees with high EI will employ deep-acting strategies instead of surface-acting strategies when providing their services to customers, displaying the desired emotions that the organization prefers. Organizations need to continue their efforts in recruiting and employing emotionally intelligent employees to represent the organization to customers, which will be an expression of

the organization's character, as the bond between the employee and the customer reflects the quality of a service-providing organization. The interest of the current study is to examine how past studies have established a relationship between using EI and regulating it through surface-acting to achieve customer satisfaction through the use of a smile (Swancott & Davis, 2023; Alsakarneh et al., 2024). However, in other studies, it was reported that using only a smile does not guarantee customer satisfaction, so it should be reinforced that the smile is sincere and made with high EI (Ginanggih et al., 2023). They can formalize their emotions self-constructively and prevent or dissipate the psychological pressure. Highly emotionally intelligent people are also effective in expressing emotions that align with the rules and regulations in an organization, ensuring that customers receive satisfaction with their services. Individuals with high EI are said to be effective emotional laborers, as they quickly adapt their felt and expressed behavior (Y. Zhang, 2023). Therefore, it is not just that deep acting is evident to them, but can also be successfully pursued in presenting their positive emotions to customers. Actors with deeper acting spend less effort than those with low EI. Thus, it has been proposed that EI is the primary attribute that facilitates employees in performing emotional labor by applying emotional strategies effectively. Overall, the studies reveal that high-emotional-intelligence employees are quite capable of managing their emotions, experience reduced pressure, and enjoy the job (Lee & Chelladurai, 2018; Kim, 2018; Silbaugh et al., 2023; Yousaf et al., 2023; Karakus et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2025). At the same time, the surface acting can, in the case of workers possessing high EI, be a very constructive trait, enabling such a person to embody positive emotions that directly and positively affect customer satisfaction. This skill also indicates the level of satisfaction among workers. Therefore, EI reduces the negativity in deep-acting laborers and enhances their positivity, enabling them to meet their expected needs.

H3: Emotional intelligence has a moderating effect on the relationship between surface acting and customer satisfaction.

H4: Emotional intelligence has a moderating effect on the relationship between deep acting and customer satisfaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants and procedure

This paper discusses the impact of emotional labor strategy on customer satisfaction. Moreover, the EI moderating factor between the emotional labor strategy and customer satisfaction has also been considered in the analyses. This study employed a quantitative, positivist survey strategy to examine the impact of emotional labor strategies on customer satisfaction, with EI analyzed as a moderating factor. The research focused on employees in customer-facing roles within Jordanian SMEs, a context selected for its high reliance on emotional labor during service interactions. A questionnaire was designed as the primary data collection instrument. Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire. A total of 340 questionnaires were distributed. Out of these,

190 were fully completed and usable for analysis, yielding a 55.9% response rate. The participants were full-time employees working in customer-facing roles within Jordanian SMEs operating in the service sector (e.g., retail, hospitality, financial services). Data were collected via an online survey platform, with invitations sent through SME business associations and professional networks in Jordan.

3.2. Measures

The scales employed in this research were adapted from established instruments in the literature to ensure content validity. All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The original scales were adapted to enhance contextual relevance for Jordanian SMEs. Minor modifications in wording were made, which were reviewed and approved by a panel of bilingual experts to ensure conceptual equivalence. The measures were first translated from English into Arabic and then back-translated into English by independent bilingual organizational psychologists to ensure linguistic and conceptual accuracy.

Deep acting (5 items) and surface acting (5 items) were measured using scales adapted from Diefendorff et al. (2005). Customer satisfaction (5 items) was measured using scales from Brakus et al. (2009) and Hur et al. (2015). EI (7 items) was assessed using a scale based on Johnson and Spector (2007) and Wong and Law (2017). As reported in the Results section, all constructs demonstrated strong reliability. The high reliability and the average variance extracted (AVE) for the surface acting scale ($\alpha = 0.984$, AVE = 0.940) suggest that the items are highly homogeneous, which is psychometrically acceptable for a narrow construct, but this will be noted as a consideration in the study's limitations. The final items for all constructs are listed verbatim in English in Appendix A.

3.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. This method was selected for its proven effectiveness in handling complex models with latent variables and its robustness with smaller sample sizes, making it appropriate for the current sample of 190 participants (Hair et al., 2017, 2019). PLS-SEM is also particularly suitable for testing moderating effects and does not require the data to be strictly normally distributed, which aligns well with the nature of survey data (Henseler et al., 2016; Sarstedt et al., 2017). While covariance-based SEM was considered, PLS-SEM was deemed more appropriate given the study's exploratory focus on moderation, the sample size, and its primary goal of predicting the key target construct of customer satisfaction (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis followed a two-step process, beginning with an assessment of the measurement (outer) model to confirm reliability and validity, followed by an evaluation of the structural (inner) model. The moderating effects of emotional intelligence were tested using the product-indicator approach. To mitigate multicollinearity and enhance the interpretability of the results, all predictor variables were mean-centered before creating the interaction terms. This

comprehensive analytical approach was well-suited to investigating the complex relationships hypothesized in the research model.

3.4. Common method bias and ethical considerations

To address the potential for common method bias, both procedural and statistical remedies were

employed. Procedurally, respondent anonymity was guaranteed to reduce evaluation apprehension and minimize the likelihood of socially desirable responses. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The unrotated exploratory factor analysis revealed that the first factor accounted for 47.84% of the variance, which is below the 50% threshold, indicating that common method bias is not a pervasive issue in this dataset.

Table 1. Common method bias

Component	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings			Rotation sums of squared loadings		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	10.525	47.841	47.841	10.525	47.841	47.841	5.295	24.067	24.067
2	2.339	10.630	58.471	2.339	10.630	58.471	4.474	20.334	44.401
3	1.094	4.973	63.443	1.094	4.973	63.443	3.081	14.004	58.405
4	1.057	4.803	68.246	1.057	4.803	68.246	2.165	9.842	68.246

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Ethics Committee of Jerash University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they participated in the survey.

4. RESULTS

The profile of the respondents, detailed in Table 2, indicates a sample representative of customer-facing personnel in Jordanian SMEs. The sample was predominantly male (58.9%), with a strong representation from the retail (40.0%) and hospitality (30.0%) sectors, reflecting key service

industries in the region. The majority of participants were in the early to mid-stages of their careers, with half (50.0%) falling within the 26-35 age bracket and a significant portion (40.0%) having 2-5 years of organizational tenure. This distribution is characteristic of the frontline service workforce. Furthermore, the composition of job positions with frontline staff comprising 60.0% of the sample, followed by team supervisors (30.0%) and junior management (10.0%), confirms that the data was collected from employees directly engaged in and supervising customer interactions, thereby ensuring the relevance of their responses to the constructs of emotional labor and customer satisfaction under investigation.

Table 2. Sample characteristics (N = 190)

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Industry	Retail	76	40.0
	Hospitality	57	30.0
	Financial services	38	20.0
	Other services	19	10.0
Gender	Male	112	58.9
	Female	78	41.1
Age group	18-25 years	38	20.0
	26-35 years	95	50.0
	36-45 years	38	20.0
	46 years and above	19	10.0
Organizational tenure	Less than 2 years	57	30.0
	2-5 years	76	40.0
	6-10 years	38	20.0
	More than 10 years	19	10.0
Job position	Frontline staff	114	60.0
	Team supervisor	57	30.0
	Junior management	19	10.0

The measurement model was rigorously assessed for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity to ensure the robustness of the constructs before proceeding with the structural model analysis. As detailed in Table 3, the results confirm strong internal consistency reliability for all constructs. Both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (ρ_c) values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, ranging from 0.718 (*deep acting*) to 0.984 (*surface acting*) for alpha, and from 0.814 (*deep acting*) to 0.987 (*surface acting*) for ρ_c (Diefendorff et al., 2005; Hur et al., 2015). Convergent validity was also established, as AVE for each construct surpassed the 0.5 benchmark, confirming that the items collectively explain

a sufficient portion of the construct's variance (Brakus et al., 2009; Wong & Law, 2017). This is further supported by all indicator loadings being statistically significant and above the 0.70 criterion. The exceptionally high AVE (0.940) for surface acting indicates near-perfect item convergence, which is attributable to the highly homogeneous nature of its measurement items. While the slightly lower Cronbach's alpha for *deep acting* (0.718) suggests minor internal inconsistencies, it remains within the acceptable range for exploratory research. The composite reliability (0.814) provides greater confidence (Johnson & Spector, 2007; Bakar & Himam, 2009). Collectively, these results affirm that

the measurement model is both dependable and valid, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent path analysis.

For the structural model, the moderating effects of *EI* were tested using the product-indicator approach, a well-established method for modeling interaction effects within PLS path models (Chin et al., 2003; Henseler & Fassott, 2009). To mitigate

multicollinearity between the interaction terms and their constituent constructs, all predictor variables were mean-centered before creating the product terms, as recommended by established guidelines (Hair et al., 2022). This methodological rigor ensures the stability and interpretability of the moderation analysis results.

Table 3. Measurement of the model

Constructs and indicators	Indicator loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	AVE
Customer satisfaction		0.817	0.821	0.872	0.578
CS1	0.750				
CS2	0.814				
CS3	0.796				
CS4	0.742				
CS5	0.792				
Deep acting		0.718	0.771	0.814	0.583
DA1	0.797				
DA2	0.729				
DA3	0.772				
DA4	0.743				
DA5	0.776				
Emotional intelligence		0.812	0.758	0.862	0.573
EI1	0.783				
EI2	0.748				
EI3	0.754				
EI4	0.747				
EI5	0.707				
EI6	0.786				
EI7	0.771				
Surface acting		0.984	0.985	0.987	0.940
SA1	0.966				
SA2	0.976				
SA3	0.971				
SA4	0.968				
SA5	0.967				
<i>EI</i> × <i>Deep acting</i>	1.000				
<i>EI</i> × <i>Surface acting</i>	1.000				

As shown in Table 4, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of discriminant validity examines whether constructs can be distinguished. The HTMT estimators between *customer satisfaction* and other constructs range from 0.132 (*EI* × *surface acting*) to 0.722 (*EI*), which are all below the conservative index of 0.85, indicating strong discriminant validity (Alsakarneh, Al-Gharaibeh, et al., 2023; Grandey, 2003). The low correlation coefficient (0.174) between *surface acting* and *customer satisfaction* suggests that the latter are distinct constructs,

which aligns with the hypothesis that *surface acting* negatively influences *customer satisfaction* (Hochschild, 1983). Likewise, the medium HTMT between *deep acting* and *EI* (0.767) indicates their correlated, yet distinct, character, which justifies the moderating effect of *EI* (Guy & Lee, 2015). The high HTMT of the *deep acting* × *EI* (0.377) can be anticipated, since its factor is correlated with its natural elements. The findings support the theoretical framework used in the study, as they indicate that the constructs are independent.

Table 4. Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio discriminant validity

Constructs	Customer satisfaction	Deep acting	EI	Surface acting	EI × Surface acting	EI × Deep acting
Customer satisfaction						
Deep acting	0.633					
EI	0.722	0.767				
Surface acting	0.174	0.310	0.394			
EI × Surface acting	0.132	0.219	0.109	0.072		
EI × Deep acting	0.242	0.377	0.173	0.109	0.370	

The effect size (f^2) and variance inflation factor (VIF) of constructs are given in Table 5. The correlations of *deep acting* ($r = 0.248$), *EI* ($r = 0.281$), and *surface acting* ($r = 0.218$) with *customer satisfaction* are moderate, indicating that these factors are meaningful predictors (Groth & Grandey, 2012; Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2020). *EI* × *surface acting* (0.110) and *EI* × *deep acting* (0.148) indicate minor yet significant effects,

which prove the validity of the moderating effects (*H4* and *H3*). The VIF values, all of which are smaller than 2, confirm the absence of multicollinearity and stable regression estimations (Lee & Kim, 2018; Makhamreh et al., 2022). The obtained results support the strength of the path analysis, and it is not significantly biased by collinearity (Kundro et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2025).

Table 5. Effect size and variance inflation factor

Constructs	Effect size (f^2)	Variance inflation factor
	Customer satisfaction	Customer satisfaction
Deep acting	0.248	1.689
EI	0.281	1.654
Surface acting	0.218	1.169
EI × Surface acting	0.110	1.183
EI × Deep acting	0.148	1.283

Table 6 and Figure 2 present the path coefficients of the theoretically hypothesized relationships between emotional labor strategies, EI, and customer satisfaction, providing empirical support for the study's theoretical framework. *H1* yielded a negative correlation between *surface acting* and *customer satisfaction* ($p = 0.046$), with a coefficient of -0.108 , indicating that the level of *surface acting* is associated with a significant reduction in *customer satisfaction*. This aligns with previous studies that support the notion that acting, characterized by the performance of unnatural emotional expressions, is viewed by customers as insincere, resulting in dissatisfaction (Grandey, 2003; Ghaffar et al., 2021). On the other hand, *H2* is confirmed with the positive beta coefficient of *deep acting* ($\beta = 0.210$, $p = 0.001$) since the authentic emotional regulation positively influences *customer satisfaction* because employees display authentic responses that result in customers trusting them and responding positively to them (Diefendorff et al., 2005; Alsakarneh, Al-Gharaibeh, et al., 2023).

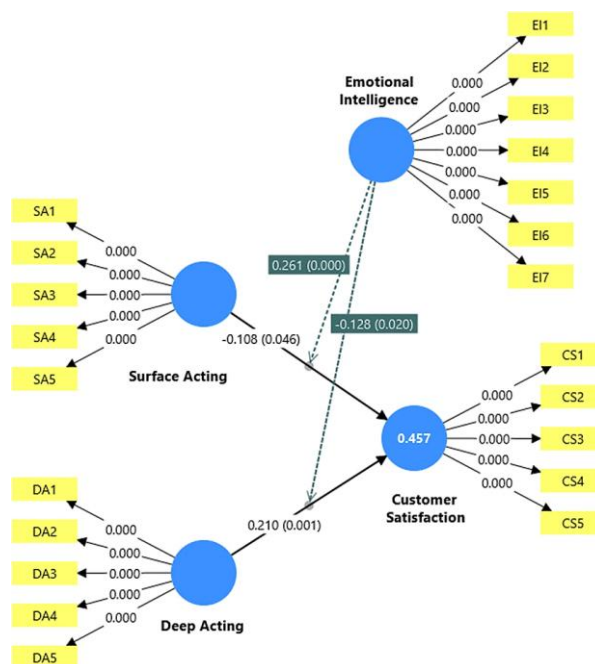
The analysis also confirms the significant moderating role of *EI*. *H3* is supported, as the positive and significant interaction term for *EI* and *surface acting* ($\beta = 0.261$, $p < 0.001$) indicates

that a higher level of *EI* mitigates the negative effect of *surface acting* on *customer satisfaction*. This finding aligns with research positing *EI* as a resource that helps employees manage the dissonance between felt and expressed emotions (Guy & Lee, 2013; Y. Zhang, 2023). Conversely, *H4* is not supported due to a significant but negative interaction coefficient for *EI* and *deep acting* ($\beta = -0.128$, $p = 0.020$). This unanticipated result suggests that *EI* paradoxically weakens the positive impact of *deep acting*. A simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991), illustrated in Figure 2, clarifies these relationships. It confirms that the detrimental effect of *surface acting* is lessened for employees with high *EI*. Meanwhile, the positive effect of *deep acting* is attenuated for employees with high *EI*, indicating a less beneficial relationship than for their less emotionally intelligent counterparts. This undermining effect may occur because highly emotionally intelligent employees are less inclined to engage in deliberate deep acting, as their natural emotional predisposition may reduce the perceived need for active regulation (Lee & Chelladurai, 2018; Erdirençelebi et al., 2023). The complete interaction analysis plot is presented in Appendix C.

Table 6. Path coefficients

Hypotheses	Path analysis	Beta	Std. dev.	t-statistics	p-values	Decision
H1	Surface acting → Customer satisfaction	-0.108	0.054	1.992	0.046	Supported
H2	Deep acting → Customer satisfaction	0.210	0.062	3.385	0.001	Supported
H3	EI × Surface acting → Customer satisfaction	0.261	0.058	4.477	0.000	Supported
H4	EI × Deep acting → Customer satisfaction	-0.128	0.055	2.335	0.020	Not supported

Figure 2. Graphical results



5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the path analysis and the correlation of the variables offer fascinating insights into the intricate relationships between emotional labor strategies, EI, and customer satisfaction among SMEs in Jordan. The results support and refute current theoretical bodies and provide new insight into how emotional regulation can be applied in service situations. The inverse correlation between surface acting and customer satisfaction makes sense because it replicates the premises of Hochschild (1983), the fundamental explanation of emotional labor, which states that fake emotional manifestations make employees psychologically uncomfortable and cannot be easily deceived by customers. Such a perception of insincerity leads to reduced satisfaction, as customers prioritize transactions over sincerity (Grandey, 2003; Ghaffar et al., 2021). The agreement between these findings and those in Western contexts (Diefendorff et al., 2005) and Asian markets (Lee & Kim, 2018) suggests a cross-cultural aversion to simulated emotions. Nevertheless, depending on the relative emphasis on this effect, collectivist societies, such as Jordan, where interpersonal harmony is crucial, are more likely to be sensitive to authenticity in their emotions (Alsakarneh, Al-Gharaibeh, et al., 2023).

The positive connection between deep acting and attitudes towards customers is so solid that it becomes evident that sincere emotional labor is used as a staple in the quality-of-service interactions. The result is consistent with studies conducted in other cultural settings, such as the United States (Grandey, 2003) and Southeast Asia (Ginanggih et al., 2023), which demonstrate that the value of authentic emotional engagement is not dependent on geographical location. The Jordanian context is exciting because deep acting does not contradict the local cultural values of hospitality and warmth that are traditional in the Middle East's culture when it comes to providing services (Alsakarneh et al., 2019). This result appears similar to other studies, suggesting that culture-specificities may determine the range of emotions individuals should express. Still, it is also clear that humans prefer to be genuine in their emotional relationships with one another, and this preference remains consistent.

There is a complex and nuanced picture of EI's role in service interactions, presenting a significant challenge to conventional wisdom regarding its universal benefit. The positive moderating influence of EI on the relationship between surface acting and customer satisfaction confirms its adaptive function as theorized by Guy and Lee (2013), suggesting that employees with higher EI possess enhanced capabilities to mitigate the typically negative effects of surface acting. This finding appears particularly relevant within the Jordanian cultural context, where high-emotional-intelligence employees may be exceptionally skilled at reframing emotional dissonance into culturally appropriate expressions that maintain interpersonal harmony, thereby reducing the detrimental impact on customer satisfaction (Erdirençelebi et al., 2023). This stands in notable contrast to Western contexts, where research indicates that even emotionally intelligent employees struggle to completely neutralize the

adverse consequences of surface acting (Groth & Grandey, 2012), highlighting the culturally specific nature of how EI functions in service environments.

The most theoretically significant finding emerges from the negative moderating influence of EI on the relationship between deep acting and customer satisfaction. This counterintuitive result suggests that EI can paradoxically undermine the positive effects of what is traditionally considered the more authentic approach to emotional labor. This phenomenon may be explained through the concept of emotional overqualification, wherein highly emotionally intelligent employees may perceive deliberate deep-acting strategies as unnecessary or artificial, potentially leading to interactions that feel calculated or patronizing to customers (Y. Zhang, 2023). Within Jordan's cultural context, where norms of emotional expressiveness emphasize spontaneity and genuine hospitality, customers may be susceptible to any perceived calculation in emotional displays, preferring entirely authentic expressions over even well-executed deep acting (Alsakarneh, Sakarneh, et al., 2023). This finding directly contrasts with research from other cultural settings, such as East Asia, where EI typically enhances the positive effects of deep acting by refining and perfecting emotional displays according to cultural expectations (Yanyu & Jizu, 2023).

These divergent moderating effects fundamentally challenge the assumption that EI represents an unqualified asset in service positions (Geng et al., 2025). Rather than consistently improving emotional labor outcomes, EI appears to interact with cultural circumstances in ways that produce strategy-specific consequences. The Jordanian context, characterized by its unique blend of collectivist values and service traditions, creates an environment where EI operates differently than in either Western or other non-Western settings. This complexity is further evident when comparing these findings with those from other developing economies, where research reveals similarly conflicting results regarding the role of EI in service interactions (Ezekiel & Nanfa, 2023). In contrast, more consistent positive patterns have been observed in Southeast Asian contexts (Ginanggih et al., 2023). This suggests that national culture, economic development, and service sector maturity collectively influence how emotional labor strategies and EI converge to impact customer satisfaction, with developing economies potentially exhibiting distinct patterns compared to industrialized nations, where service norms are more standardized and customer expectations are more predictable (Kundro et al., 2022).

The theoretical implications of these findings are substantial, questioning the universal applicability of emotional labor theories developed primarily in Western contexts. The foundational dichotomy between surface and deep acting established by Hochschild (1983) requires expansion to account for how these strategies interact with EI across diverse cultural landscapes. Similarly, the presumption that EI unconditionally benefits emotional labor performance must be reconsidered in favor of a more nuanced understanding that acknowledges its strategy-specific and culturally conditional nature (A. Zhang & Nasir, 2025). For human resource practices in Jordanian SMEs and

similar cultural environments, these insights necessitate moving beyond blanket approaches to EI training toward more tailored strategies that account for how EI interfaces with specific emotional labor requirements (Eneizan et al., 2021). Organizations should reconsider training methodologies that emphasize deep acting techniques, particularly for emotionally intelligent employees who may naturally resist prescribed emotional displays (Lee & Chelladurai, 2018). Multinational corporations operating in Jordan must adapt their emotional labor expectations to align with local cultural preferences, rather than imposing standardized service delivery protocols.

While this study provides valuable insights, its limitations highlight promising directions for future research. The singular focus on Jordan raises questions about how these relationships manifest in other Middle Eastern or developing economies with distinct service cultures. Longitudinal research could shed light on whether these effects persist over time or evolve in response to developments in Jordan's service sector. Qualitative investigations would be particularly valuable for uncovering the underlying reasons for EI's unexpected moderating effects, as well as exploring the psychological mechanisms that drive these complex interactions. Additionally, incorporating customer perspectives would enhance understanding of how emotional labor strategies are perceived and evaluated within this cultural context (Collier et al., 2018), providing a more comprehensive picture of the service interaction dynamic. These avenues for future research would substantially contribute to developing a more culturally informed understanding of emotional labor and EI in non-Western service environments, ultimately leading to more effective and contextually appropriate management practices.

The research results have remarkable implications in numerous fields. In managerial terms, the study's findings demonstrate the relevance of developing truly felt emotional courses of action within the company, especially in small and medium-sized business firms dealing with service provision. Managers should focus more on training programs that foster genuine emotional engagement rather than merely presenting suitable ways, because deep acting is consistently associated with increased customer satisfaction and surface-level deterioration. The subtle nature of EI implies that, instead of focusing solely on EI tests during their hiring processes, companies should combine them with tests of abilities to actualize the expressed emotions. Theoretically, this paper challenges the universality of emotional labor models, as they demonstrate the influence of contributing to the success of diverse strategies. The unexpected relationship between EI and deep acting as a negative moderator warrants reconsideration of current frameworks, particularly in collectivist societies where uncontrolled emotional expression may be more valued than controlled ones. Realistically, organizations should utilize custom emotional labor training to incorporate individual differences in EI and cultural perspectives on emotional expression. Human resources and customer service management practitioners can use these insights to create interventions that help them minimize emotional dissonance without

compromising the quality of their services. Socially, the work addresses the more inclusive aspects of emotional labor in the workplace, including well-being and customer relations, and highlights the need for an organizational policy to prioritize the emotional well-being of workers. The results also relate to the debates on the emotional labor of service work in developing economies, where the norms of hospitality emerge as present-day business practices merge. Organizations can enhance the service environment to make it more sustainable and satisfying for employees and customers through multidimensional implications, as has been addressed.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides critical insights into the dynamics of emotional labor within Jordanian SMEs, revealing that the relationship between emotional strategies and customer satisfaction is more complex and culturally nuanced than previously theorized. Theoretically, the findings make a substantial contribution by challenging the presumed universal benefit of EI in service contexts. The results demonstrate that EI functions as a double-edged sword: while it can buffer the negative effects of surface acting, it unexpectedly attenuates the positive effects of deep acting. This compels a reevaluation of existing emotional labor frameworks, suggesting that the foundational dichotomy between surface and deep acting must be expanded to account for the culturally contingent moderating role of individual traits, such as EI. The universal applicability of models developed in Western contexts is therefore called into question, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive theories that accommodate the unique social dynamics of Middle Eastern and other non-Western service environments. From a practical standpoint, these findings offer actionable guidance for managers and human resources professionals in Jordanian SMEs. Rather than investing in generic EI training, organizations should prioritize cultivating genuine emotional engagement through targeted deep acting training. Recruitment and development programs should focus on fostering authentic empathy and situational awareness, rather than teaching scripted performances. For multinational corporations, this research highlights the importance of adapting global service standards to local cultural expectations, as importing standardized emotional labor protocols may prove counterproductive in the Jordanian market.

This study is not without its limitations, which also delineate avenues for future research. Its cross-sectional design precludes definitive causal inferences, and its focus on a single national context limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the potential redundancy in the surface acting scale, indicated by its exceptionally high reliability, suggests the measure could be refined. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal designs to trace the evolution of these relationships over time. Crucially, these findings should be tested through replications in other Middle Eastern and collectivist cultures to validate and refine the proposed cultural boundary conditions. Qualitative investigations are also

recommended to unravel the underlying reasons why high EI undermines deep acting, providing deeper insight into the cognitive and emotional processes of both employees and customers.

Through such efforts, scholars and practitioners can move toward a more sophisticated, globally-informed understanding of emotional labor.

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APPENDIX A. SURVEY ITEMS

All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree).

Customer satisfaction

(Adapted from Brakus et al., 2009; Hur et al., 2015)

English version:

1. I believe that [Company name] is committed to customer satisfaction.
2. I feel that the customers I serve are generally happy with the service they receive.
3. My customers would say that they are satisfied with my service.
4. I am successful at meeting my customers' needs.
5. Overall, my interactions with customers result in high satisfaction.

Deep acting

(Adapted from Diefendorff et al., 2005)

English version:

1. I try to actually feel the emotions that I must show to customers.
2. I make an effort to genuinely feel the emotions that I need to display toward others.
3. I work hard to feel the emotions that I need to show to customers.
4. I consciously work on developing a genuine feeling for the emotions I am required to display.
5. I strive to create the real emotion within myself that I am supposed to show.

Surface acting

(Adapted from Diefendorff et al., 2005)

English version:

1. I just pretend to have the emotions I need to display for my job.
2. I put on a "mask" in order to express the right emotions for my job.
3. I fake the emotions I show when dealing with customers.
4. I show feelings to customers that are different from what I feel inside.
5. The emotions I express to customers are not genuine.

Emotional intelligence

(Adapted from Johnson & Spector, 2007; Wong & Law, 2017)

English version:

1. I have a good understanding of my own emotions.
2. I am able to control my own emotions effectively.
3. I can recognize the emotions of my customers accurately.
4. I am a self-motivated person.
5. I am able to manage the emotions of others effectively.
6. I can use my emotions to facilitate my performance in customer interactions.
7. I am empathetic to the emotional states of others.

APPENDIX B. CROSS LOADINGS

<i>Constructs</i>	<i>Customer satisfaction</i>	<i>Deep acting</i>	<i>Emotional intelligence</i>	<i>Surface acting</i>	<i>EI x Surface acting</i>	<i>EI x Deep acting</i>
CS1	0.750	0.433	0.525	0.211	0.034	-0.209
CS2	0.814	0.381	0.435	0.085	0.139	-0.191
CS3	0.796	0.377	0.435	0.130	0.079	-0.136
CS4	0.742	0.364	0.462	0.051	0.070	-0.130
CS5	0.792	0.327	0.381	0.118	0.132	-0.164
DA1	0.397	0.797	0.343	0.225	-0.076	-0.240
DA2	0.258	0.729	0.319	0.224	-0.178	-0.202
DA3	0.383	0.772	0.471	0.073	-0.240	-0.304
DA4	0.329	0.743	0.436	0.070	-0.079	-0.230
DA5	0.307	0.776	0.445	0.302	0.064	-0.119
EI1	0.393	0.478	0.783	0.168	-0.040	-0.167
EI2	0.361	0.341	0.748	0.184	-0.037	-0.041
EI3	0.433	0.406	0.754	0.177	-0.062	-0.079
EI4	0.437	0.447	0.747	0.114	0.038	-0.089
EI5	0.453	0.412	0.707	0.434	-0.144	-0.082
EI6	0.423	0.440	0.786	0.241	-0.108	-0.163
EI7	0.348	0.304	0.771	0.374	-0.044	-0.126
SA1	0.149	0.225	0.324	0.966	0.059	-0.098
SA2	0.165	0.246	0.344	0.976	0.079	-0.090
SA3	0.147	0.258	0.358	0.971	0.076	-0.106
SA4	0.156	0.257	0.341	0.968	0.071	-0.115
SA5	0.155	0.242	0.330	0.967	0.063	-0.114
<i>EI x Deep acting</i>	-0.220	-0.327	-0.155	-0.108	0.370	1.000
<i>EI x Surface acting</i>	0.116	-0.152	-0.084	0.072	1.000	0.370

APPENDIX C. MODERATION SLOPE

Figure C.1. Moderation slope: Emotional intelligence and surface acting

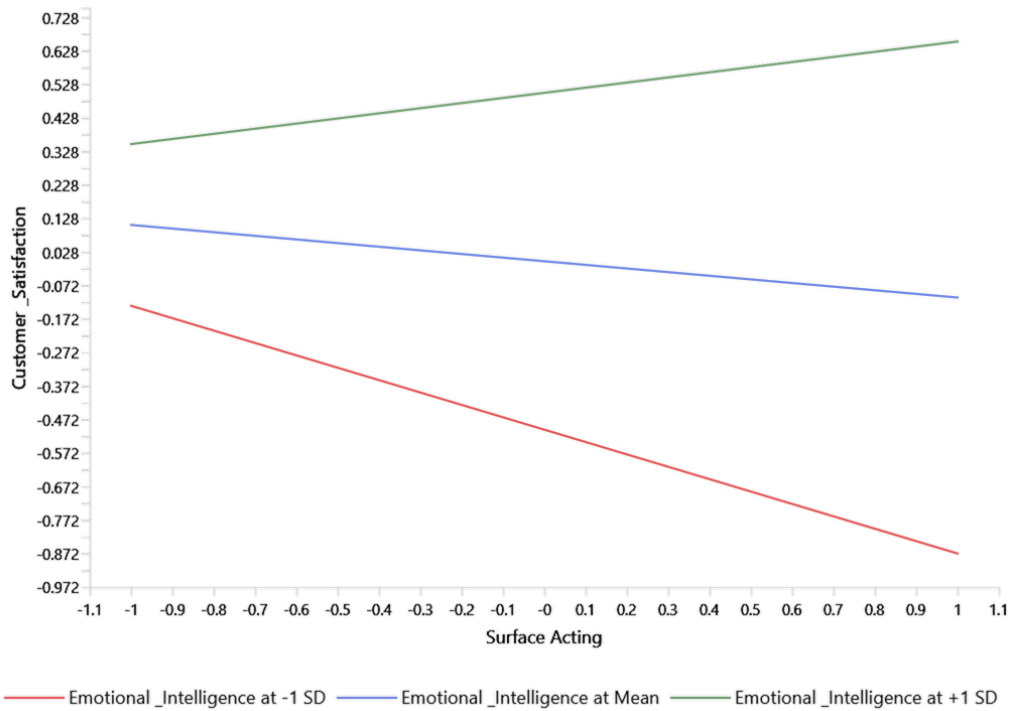


Figure C.2. Moderation slope: Emotional intelligence and deep acting

