

**Emotional Labor Strategies and Job Retention:
Moderating Role of Resilience Among Restaurant Frontline Employees in
Nairobi City County, Kenya**

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Abstract

This study assessed the connection between emotional labor strategies and job retention in classified restaurants in Nairobi City County, Kenya. The moderating variable was employee resilience. The investigation was supported by the theories of Conservation of Resources and Affective Events. An embedded mixed-methods research design was used. 790 waiters and waitresses working in classified restaurants formed the target population. Frontline employees were chosen by convenience sampling, while restaurant managers were purposively chosen for interviews. Of the 39 restaurant managers, 1 manager was used for pretesting and 38 were eligible for the main study; 17 managers were interviewed until data saturation was reached. Of the 266 questionnaires allocated, 6 were used for pretesting and 260 were distributed for the main study; 246 were returned and 240 valid questionnaires were analysed. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire, while qualitative insights were obtained through semi-structured interviews with restaurant managers. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple linear regression and hierarchical regression, whereas qualitative data were analysed thematically. The results showed that surface acting had a significant negative relationship with job (B = -0.197, β = -0.133, p = .016), while deep acting had a significant positive relationship (B = 0.332, β = 0.181, p = .001). Automatic emotional regulation had the strongest positive relationship with job retention (B = 0.462, β = 0.445, p < .001). The three emotional labor strategies jointly explained 33.3% of the variation in job retention (R = .577, R² = .333, adjusted R² = .325). Employee resilience had a significant positive direct relationship with job retention (B = 0.913, β = 0.421, p < .001). Resilience weakened the negative relationship between surface acting and job retention (B = 0.130, β = 0.440, p = .008) and strengthened the positive relationship between deep acting and job retention

($B = 0.087$, $\beta = 0.096$, $p = .044$). However, resilience did not significantly moderate the relationship between automatic emotional regulation and job retention ($B = 0.041$, $\beta = 0.040$, $p = .374$). The qualitative findings supported the statistical results by showing that surface acting contributed to emotional strain and withdrawal, whereas genuine emotional engagement, natural emotional control, supportive leadership and resilient coping encouraged employees to remain.

Keywords: emotional labor; surface acting; deep acting; automatic emotional regulation; resilience; job retention; classified restaurants; Nairobi City County

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The service sector has expanded rapidly and many organisations increasingly compete through the quality of customer experience. In high-contact service environments, frontline staff are expected to maintain a pleasant, patient and upbeat demeanour. Restaurants are not an exception, particularly when interacting with customers. These emotive displays are now a component of organizational performance, brand reputation and service excellence. However, the emotions required by the organisation may not always match what employees genuinely feel, especially when they encounter rude customers, complaints, heavy workloads, long shifts or peak-hour pressure (Kwortnik & Thompson, 2023; Lee & Ok, 2022).

Emotional labor refers to the process through which employees manage and communicate their feelings during service encounters in ways that comply with organisational standards. In this study, emotional labor strategies are understood as the techniques used by restaurant employees to control emotions and produce suitable emotional expressions when dealing with customers. The three strategies examined are surface acting, deep acting and automatic emotional regulation. Surface acting occurs when employees change outward expressions without changing their genuine internal feelings. Deep acting involves consciously modifying internal feelings so that the emotions displayed are genuinely experienced. Automatic emotional regulation refers to a smooth and largely unconscious process in which the required emotions arise naturally and are expressed with limited conscious effort (Brotheridge & Lee, 2020; Kang & Sung, 2023).

Job retention is an organisation's capacity to retain employees over time. This happens by fostering environments that support emotional health, contentment and attachment to work. In this study, intention to stay, job embeddedness and affective attachment were used to measure job retention. High staff turnover increases recruitment and training costs. It also disrupts service consistency. More so, it weakens the organisational knowledge required for personalised customer service. For these reasons, retention is particularly important in restaurants (Hassan et al., 2021; Shuck et al., 2020).

Resilience is the ability of restaurant employees to adjust to and bounce back from emotional labor demands. It enables employees to stay focused in the face of uncertainty. Also, it helps them to learn from challenging customer experiences. Moreover, through resilience, workers can use their social networks to overcome workplace challenges. Resilience was seen as both a direct personal resource linked to job retention and a moderator that might alter the direction or strength of the relationship between emotional labor strategies and job retention (Luthar et al., 2021; Rutter, 2021).

Nairobi City County presents a perfect environment for examining these relationships. There are many classified restaurants in the city. It also has a thriving competitive hospitality sector and high service expectations. Despite high workloads and emotionally charged exchanges, frontline staff in classified restaurants are expected to remain composed and offer consistent client experiences. However, staff turnover still remains a problem, and managers tend to focus more on operational efficiency than on the emotional demands of restaurant work (KNBS, 2022; Wambua & Kimani, 2024).

1.2 Problem Statement and Rationale

Customer-contact employees are very crucial to the restaurant business. The emotional costs of doing so are often seen as a typical aspect of service work, yet, restaurants expect these workers to maintain positive emotional displays. Employees may experience emotional dissonance, exhaustion, dissatisfaction and withdrawal when they consistently repress true emotions. These outcomes can make them less inclined to stick with the organization (Amissah et al., 2022; Lee & Ok, 2023).

Emotional labor has been related to burnout, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and turnover intention in past studies. However, because the outcomes vary depending on the specific emotional labor strategy employed, the evidence is not always consistent. Surface acting is commonly associated with strain, while deep acting is generally regarded as more genuine and beneficial. Automatic emotional regulation is expected to consume fewer emotional resources, but its direct contribution to job retention has received less attention. Moreover, many studies focus on hotels, healthcare and other service contexts rather than classified restaurants in Nairobi City County (Hur et al., 2023; Kang & Sung, 2023; Koole, 2020).

Another limitation is the limited examination of resilience as a moderator. Resilience may protect employees who use surface acting by helping them recover from emotional resource loss. It may also enable employees to sustain deep acting by supporting empathy, emotional reframing and adaptive coping. However, it is unclear whether resilience strengthens every emotional labor strategy in the same way. This study therefore generated context-specific evidence on the combined and individual effects of surface acting, deep acting and automatic emotional regulation on job retention, as well as the moderating role of employee resilience (Bui et al., 2023; Kim & Lee, 2023).

1.3 Study Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to establish the influence of emotional labor strategies on job retention in classified restaurants in Nairobi City County, Kenya, and to examine whether employee resilience moderated these relationships.

- To establish the influence of surface acting on job retention in classified restaurants in Nairobi City County, Kenya.
- To determine the influence of deep acting on job retention in classified restaurants in Nairobi City County, Kenya.
- To assess the influence of automatic emotional regulation on job retention in classified restaurants in Nairobi City County, Kenya.
- To examine the moderating effect of resilience on the relationship between emotional labor strategies and job retention in classified restaurants in Nairobi City County, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Labor Strategies

Emotional labor is a central feature of service work because employees are required to manage, communicate and sometimes suppress emotions in accordance with organisational display rules. Kindness, tolerance, excitement and compassion are not just personal traits in restaurants; they are often explicit or informal employment requirements. Although poorly managed emotional demands can lead to emotional dissonance, tension and burnout, emotional labor can enhance customer satisfaction and organisation's image (Harris & Dutton, 2023; Kwortnik & Thompson, 2023; Lee & Ok, 2022).

Surface acting has been compared to an emotional mask or disguise. Workers alter their facial expressions without altering their underlying emotions. Feigning emotions, pretending to be happy, hiding annoyance and seeming enthusiastic although worn out are common signs. In short term, surface acting can preserve a professional appearance. However, the discrepancy between felt and expressed emotions depletes psychological resources and heightens emotional strain. Thus, extended surface acting is typically associated with burnout, emotional tiredness, and turnover intention (Harris & Ghiselli, 2021; Hülshager & Schewe, 2020; Lee & Ok, 2023).

Deep acting is modifying one's own emotions to make the emotions on show truly felt. Workers might reframe difficult client's behaviour or adopt the customer's viewpoint. They may also remind themselves of the importance of offering quality service. Deep acting is frequently linked to authenticity, improved service performance and organisational commitment. This is because it lessens the distinction between real and presented emotions. Deep acting still necessitates mental effort, though, and its advantages may diminish in situations where workload are customer animosity are constant (Hur et al., 2023; Joffe et al., 2025; Shin & Hur, 2021).

It is easier to regulate emotions automatically. Employees do not need much deliberate repression or cognitive reframing. This is because they naturally experience and express

emotions that align with organizational standards. This tactic can help maintain composure, consistency and professionalism. However, it is still unclear from the literature whether spontaneous emotional regulation is a result of workplace socialization and experience, an internalised form of deep acting, an acquired ability or a stable personality trait (Kang & Sung, 2023; Koole, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2023).

2.2 Resilience and Job Retention

Resilience is the ability to adapt constructively to stress and hardships. Resilient workers are more likely to bounce back from challenging client interactions and stay focused in the face of uncertainty. They are also more likely to learn from setbacks and rely on co-workers when faced with obstacles in the emotionally taxing restaurant industry. Resilience therefore serves as a personal psychological resource that can promote employee wellbeing and sustained performance (Bui et al., 2023; Luthar et al., 2021; Rutter, 2021).

There is more to job retention than just not quitting. It reflects an employee's intention to stay, attachment to the organisation and embeddedness in the job. Retention is strengthened when employees experience fair treatment, supportive supervision, recognition, growth opportunities and a healthy workplace culture. In emotionally demanding settings, these organisational conditions can reduce exhaustion and help employees manage the emotional expectations attached to customer service (Adebayo & Ugochukwu, 2021; Hassan et al., 2021; Shuck et al., 2020).

The relationship between resilience and retention may be direct and conditional. Directly, resilient employees may be more willing to remain because they can adapt, learn and recover. As a moderator, resilience may reduce the harmful effects of surface acting and increase the positive effects of deep acting. The effect on automatic emotional regulation is less clear because automatic regulation already requires limited conscious effort and may therefore depend less on additional psychological resources (Bui et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2025).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources Theory proposes that individuals seek to acquire, protect and preserve valuable resources such as emotional energy, time, health, self-esteem and social support. Stress occurs when resources are threatened, lost or invested without adequate return. The theory offers a useful justification for the various ways in which emotional labor strategies can affect job retention (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011).

Employees who engage in surface acting must repress their true emotions. Also, they must constantly watch how they show themselves. Exhaustion and disengagement may result from this recurrent emotional investment. Although it still necessitates cognitive work, deep acting may protect resources by lessening the tension between internal emotions and outward

manifestations. Since appropriate emotions emerge with little conscious control, automatic emotional regulation is predicted to save the most resources. Another personal resource that may help employees maintain adaptive emotional strategies, enhance recovery and limit resource depletion is resilience (Hobfoll, 1989; Hur et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2022).

2.3.2 Affective Events Theory

The Affective Events Theory describes how certain workplace incidents elicit emotional responses that influence workers' attitudes and behaviours. Customer complaints, compliments, irrational demands, pressure during peak-hours and disputes with supervisors or co-workers are all common experiences for restaurant staff. These incidents cause instantaneous emotional reactions that build up over time. They influence commitment, work satisfaction and decisions to stay or quit (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Lee et al., 2022).

Employee reactions to such incidents are determined by emotional labor strategies. Because the employee conceals their annoyance without making any changes, surface acting may worsen negative emotions. Employees who engage in deep acting may be able to reframe the incident and produce a more sincere positive reaction. Employees with automatic emotional regulation may be able to react calmly and effortlessly. Resilience also affects how workers interpret difficult events and how quickly they recover from them (Lee et al., 2022; Junça-Silva & Lopes, 2023).

In this study, Conservation of Resources Theory explains how emotional labor strategies may conserve or deplete employees' psychological resources, while Affective Events Theory explains how emotionally charged workplace events and employees' emotional responses are connected to attitudes and decisions to stay or leave.

2.4 Empirical Gaps

There is little data from Nairobi City County's classified restaurants, despite numerous research looking at emotional labor in hotels, hospitals and other service sectors (Kim & Lee, 2022; Lee & Madera, 2019). Additionally, whereas surface acting, deep acting and automatic emotional regulation may have distinct effects on retention, prior research frequently approaches emotional labor as a unified construct (Kang & Sung, 2023; Lee & Ok, 2022). In contrast to job retention as evaluated by intention to stay, job embeddedness and affective attachment, the literature focuses more on emotional tiredness, job satisfaction and turnover intention (Hassan et al., 2021; Lee & Ok, 2023).

Furthermore, surface acting and deep acting have more empirical support than automatic emotional regulation, particularly when it comes to long-term retention (Smith & Jones, 2023; Koole, 2020). Resilience, as a moderator of the relationship between each emotional labor strategy and job retention has not been extensively studied (Bui et al., 2023; Kim & Lee, 2023). More so, few studies combine quantitative evidence with managers' qualitative explanations of

how emotional labor influences actual workplace withdrawal and retention (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Study Area

The study was carried out in classified restaurants in Nairobi City County, Kenya, using an embedded mixed-methods research design. Nairobi was chosen because it has a sizable and competitive hospitality industry, a high volume of customer-contact work, and a concentration of classified restaurants. Additionally, classified restaurants are subject to rigorous service standards that mandate that frontline staff regularly exhibit the proper emotions.

3.2 Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The study's unit of observation was 790 waiters and waitresses employed in Nairobi City County's classified restaurants. The unit of analysis was the individual frontline employee because the quantitative regression analyses were conducted using individual employee responses. The 39 classified restaurants constituted the study setting. There were 39 classified restaurants in Nairobi City County at the time of the study.

Convenience sampling was employed to choose frontline staff. This approach was considered suitable because access to employees was influenced by shift schedules, work pressure and availability during service operations. Restaurant managers were selected purposively because they possessed the experience required to explain emotional labor practices, employee wellbeing and retention patterns. (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

Slovin's formula produced a required employee sample of 266. Six questionnaires were used for pretesting, leaving 260 questionnaires for the main data collection. A total of 260 questionnaires were distributed, 246 were returned and six were excluded because of substantial missing data. The final quantitative sample was therefore 240, representing 92.3% of the questionnaires distributed for the main study.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments and Measurement

Quantitative data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire divided into sections covering demographic characteristics, emotional labor strategies, employee resilience and job retention. The constructs were adapted from established measures and modified to fit classified restaurant employees (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Hassan et al., 2021; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2022) (Table 1).

Table 1: Study Constructs

Construct	Role in Model	Indicators	Items	Scale
Surface acting	Independent variable	Feigning emotions; positive display; emotion masking; pretend enjoyment	5	Five-point Likert
Deep acting	Independent variable	Empathetic engagement; genuine emotion; internal emotional alignment; authentic connection	5	Five-point Likert
Automatic emotional regulation	Independent variable	Natural positivity; emotional adjustment; instinctive calm; effortless optimism	4	Five-point Likert
Employee resilience	Moderator/direct predictor	Adaptive capacity; learning orientation; network utilisation	9	Five-point Likert
Job retention	Dependent variable	Intention to stay; job embeddedness; affective attachment	10	Five-point Likert

Qualitative data were obtained using a semi-structured interview schedule administered to restaurant managers. The interviews sought explanations regarding emotional demands, employee coping, turnover, management support and the ways in which different emotional labor strategies influenced employees' decisions to remain or leave. Of the 38 managers eligible

for the main qualitative study, 17 were interviewed. Interviews were stopped when data saturation was reached, as further inclusion was no longer necessary.

3.4 Pretesting, Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was pretested with 6 respondents. The pretest was conducted in one classified restaurant that was excluded from the main study. The interview schedule was also pretested with 1 manager of the same outlet. After pretesting, the remaining 38 restaurant managers were eligible for the main qualitative study, and 17 managers were interviewed until data saturation was reached. The process helped identify unclear wording, omitted issues, question flow and the approximate duration of data collection. (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2021).

Face and content validity were assessed through review by the academic supervisors before and after pretesting. Construct validity through exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis was not conducted because the study used the validity and reliability procedures prescribed for this level of study. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. All coefficients were at or above the accepted threshold of .70, confirming that the measurement scales were sufficiently reliable for further analysis. (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The reliability results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Reliability Results

Construct/Sub-construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Surface acting	5	.723
Deep acting	5	.732
Automatic emotional regulation	4	.771
Employee resilience	9	.747
Adaptive capacity	3	.768
Learning orientation	3	.701
Network utilisation	3	.736
Job retention	10	.961
Intention to stay	3	.904
Job embeddedness	4	.886
Affective attachment	3	.954

3.5 Data Collection, Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Questionnaires were self-administered to frontline employees with the assistance of trained research assistants. Follow-up messages were used to encourage completion within the agreed period, after which the questionnaires were collected in person. Interviews were conducted at respondents' workplaces or another convenient location, depending on availability and preference.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. Frequencies and percentages summarised demographic characteristics, while means and standard deviations described the study constructs. Pearson correlation assessed bivariate relationships. Multiple linear regression examined the joint and unique influence of surface acting, deep acting and automatic emotional regulation on job retention. Hierarchical regression tested the direct contribution of resilience and the interaction terms between resilience and each emotional labor strategy. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level. Qualitative data were analysed thematically and integrated with the quantitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hayes, 2018).

The regression assumptions were assessed using scatter plots for linearity and homoscedasticity, a histogram and Normal P-P plot for the normality of residuals, Cook's distance for influential cases and tolerance and variance inflation factor values for multicollinearity. The diagnostic results supported the suitability of the data for linear regression (Field, 2018; Hair et al., 2019). The possibility of common method bias was acknowledged because the major quantitative variables were collected from the same respondents using self-report questionnaires.

Ethical requirements included institutional approval, permission to access the restaurants, voluntary participation and informed consent. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to decline or withdraw. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected, and the data were used only for academic purposes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

4. Results

4.1 Response Profile

Of the 260 questionnaires distributed, 246 were returned, giving a return rate of 94.6%. Six questionnaires were eliminated since they had a significant amount of missing data. 240 questionnaires representing a response rate of 92.3% were used for the final analysis. Of the responders, 72.1% were women and 27.9% were men.

4.2 Descriptive Findings on Employee Resilience

Employee resilience was found to be typically high, with a composite mean of 4.07 (SD = 0.60), indicating a generally high level of resilience. Particularly, respondents showed strong learning orientation and network utilisation. They stated that they shared their knowledge with others, sought for better methods to work following problems, and used feedback to develop. Comparatively speaking, adaptive capacity was lower, particularly the ability to stay focused during uncertainty, although employees generally reported that they could adjust to workplace changes and unexpected demands.

4.3 Multiple Regression Results for Emotional Labor Strategies

The combined and separate relationships of surface acting, deep acting and automatic emotional regulation with job retention were examined using multiple linear regression. Table 3 provides an overview of the model results.

Table 3: Regression Model Summary for the Relationship between Emotional Labor Strategies and Job Retention

Model statistic	Value	Interpretation
R	.577	The emotional labor strategies had a moderately strong joint relationship with job retention.
R ²	.333	The three strategies jointly explained 33.3% of the variation in job retention.
Adjusted R ²	.325	The model retained substantial explanatory power after adjustment for the number of predictors.
F statistic	F(3,236) = 39.279, p < .001	The overall regression model was statistically significant.

The regression results are presented in Table 4. There was a statistically significant negative relationship between surface acting and job retention. Increased surface acting was linked to lower retention, holding the other emotional labor strategies constant. The qualitative results supported this pattern: managers linked repeated emotional masking with exhaustion, stress, low morale, dissatisfaction and sudden resignation. Surface was not viewed as sustainable when used continuously, although it could help employees appear professional during difficult encounters.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients for the Relationship between Emotional Labor Strategies and Job Retention

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	Decision
Surface acting	-0.197	0.081	-0.133	-2.423	.016	Significant negative relationship
Deep acting	0.332	0.103	0.181	3.213	.001	Significant positive relationship
Automatic emotional regulation	0.462	0.060	0.445	7.698	<.001	Strongest positive relationship

Job retention was positively and statistically significantly associated with deep acting. Employees were more likely to stick to their jobs if they made an effort to understand customers, reframe challenging situations and cultivate real positive emotions. Managers associated deep acting with patience, empathy, genuine service and improved coping. However, they also pointed out that deep acting could become exhausting where difficult customer encounters occurred repeatedly without adequate support.

Automatic emotional regulation had the greatest positive association with job retention. Employees who naturally remained calm, positive and professional were more likely to stay. Managers described these employees as emotionally intelligent, composed and able to solve problems without becoming overwhelmed. The result suggests that emotional regulation is particularly beneficial when appropriate emotions arise with limited psychological effort.

4.4 Hierarchical Moderation Analysis

Hierarchical regression was completed in three stages (Table 5). Model 1 included the three emotional labor strategies. Model 2 added employee resilience as a direct predictor. Model 3 added the three interaction terms between resilience and each emotional labor strategy.

Table 5: Model Summary for the Moderating Role of Employee Resilience

Model	Predictors Added	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	ΔR ²	F	p
1	Surface acting (SA), deep acting (DA) and automatic emotional regulation (AER)	.577	.333	.325	.333	39.279	<.001
2	Employee resilience	.655	.429	.419	.096	44.116	<.001
3	SA×Resilience, DA×Resilience and AER×Resilience	.694	.482	.466	.053	30.814	<.001

Adding employee resilience increased the explained variance in job retention from 33.3% to 42.9%, an increase of 9.6 percentage points. Adding the interaction terms further increased the explained variance to 48.2%, an additional 5.3 percentage points. All three hierarchical models were statistically significant. Regression coefficients results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Regression Coefficients for the Moderating Role of Employee Resilience

Effect	B	β	t	p	Interpretation
Direct effect of resilience	0.913	0.421	6.280	<.001	Resilience had a positive direct relationship with job retention.
Surface acting $\times$ resilience	0.130	0.440	2.708	.008	Resilience weakened the negative relationship between surface acting and job retention.
Deep acting $\times$ resilience	0.087	0.096	2.023	.044	Resilience strengthened the positive relationship between deep acting and job retention.
AER $\times$ resilience	0.041	0.040	0.891	.374	The moderating relationship was not significant.

Employee resilience had a positive and statistically significant direct relationship with job retention. Employees who adapted to workplace changes, learnt from difficult situations and used support networks were more likely to remain with their organisations.

The interaction between surface acting and resilience was positive and significant. Because the direct relationship of surface acting was negative, the positive interaction indicated that resilience reduced the severity of this harmful relationship. Surface acting still weakened retention, but the reduction was smaller among employees with high resilience.

Resilience and deep acting have a favourable and significant interaction. Employees with higher levels of adaptability, learning orientation and network use demonstrated a stronger favourable correlation between deep acting and job retention. Therefore, resilience enabled workers to sustain empathy and genuine emotional engagement without quickly exhausting their psychological reserves.

The interaction between resilience and automatic emotional regulation was not significant. Across all resilience levels, automatic emotional regulation encouraged job retention. Increased resilience did not dramatically alter the outcome. This could be explained by the approach already operating naturally which requires little conscious psychological effort.

5. Discussion

5.1 Surface Acting and Job Retention

The negative relationship of surface acting corroborates the large body of research that connects emotional dissonance, fatigue and turnover intention to emotional masking. Frontline employees who constantly seem to be happy must keep an eye on their facial expressions. This should happen while hiding real annoyance, exhaustion or frustration. This ultimately results in a mismatch between felt and expressed emotions and depletes psychological resources (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2020; Lee & Ok, 2023; Lu et al., 2022).

Surface acting suggests continuous resource expenditure without a corresponding emotional gain. This is compatible with the conservation of resources theory. Employees may withdraw or quit so as to preserve their remaining resources. This occurs when options for recovery, supportive supervision and equitable treatments are scarce. This conclusion is also explained by the affective events theory. It states that unpleasant emotional events arise from persistent complaints, hostile customers and pressure during peak hours, yet surface acting conceals rather than addressing the associated feelings (Hobfoll, 1989; Lee et al., 2022; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

A crucial distinction between short term service performance and long term employee wellbeing is demonstrated by the qualitative result that some proficient surface performers appeared professional. Restaurants may be able to achieve immediate display regulations with the use of surface acting. Its apparent service benefit, however, should not be taken as proof that promotes long term retention (Tian et al., 2021).

5.2 Deep Acting and Job Retention

The positive relationship of deep acting is consistent with research that describes it as a more authentic and psychologically beneficial emotional labor strategy. Employees can use empathy, perspective taking and cognitive reframing to bring their inner feelings closer to those required for service. This alignment may increase positive feelings, authenticity and connection to the business in addition to reducing emotional dissonance (Hur et al., 2023; Joffe et al., 2025; Shin & Hur, 2021).

The data also support affective events theory since deep acting modifies employees' perceptions of emotionally charged occurrences if a difficult client is seen as frustrated rather than personally hostile, an employee may respond more favourably. Although it still takes work, less emotional conflict may preserve psychological resources according to the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

It is conceptually significant that managers warn that deep acting can become taxing. It is not appropriate to claim that deep acting is always advantageous in every workplace. The cognitive effort required may become a demand in and of itself when there is constant client pressure and no opportunity for employees to recuperate. This explains the continued significance of organizational support and employee resilience (Hur et al., 2023; Kim & Lee, 2023).

5.3 Automatic Emotional Regulation and Job Retention

Automatic emotional regulation was found to be the best positive predictor of job retention. This finding supports the claim that intentional reframing or emotional masking need more psychological energy than naturally matched emotions. Workers who naturally maintain composure and optimism can fulfil service standards with less conflict between their inner emotions and their external actions (Kang & Sung, 2023; Koole, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2023).

Because surface and deep acting have received more attention than automatic emotional control, this study adds to the body of literature. It implies that employees may internalize suitable service answers with the aid of emotional competence, experience, and workplace socialization. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design is unable to ascertain if automatic regulation is essentially a learned ability, a fixed trait, or a sophisticated type of taught emotional regulation (Smith & Jones, 2023).

5.4 Direct and Moderating Role of Resilience

The ability of employees to adapt, learn, and use social networks is a retention resource in and of itself, as evidenced by the direct positive relationship of resilience. Resilient employees are not simply better at enduring pressure; they are also more able to recover, seek support and find improved ways of working after setbacks (Bui et al., 2023; Luthar et al., 2021).

The significant surface acting interaction supports the protective-resource argument in Conservation of Resources Theory. Resilience did not reverse the harmful relationship of surface acting, but it reduced its severity. This distinction is crucial from a practical standpoint. Resilience training might help workers. However, it should not be used as an excuse for overly demanding emotional demands or ongoing exposure to abusive customers (Hobfoll, 1989; Lu et al., 2022).

Resilience enhances positive emotional involvement, as demonstrated by the important deep acting connection. Employees who are adaptable are better equipped to reframe difficulties, absorb criticism and provide sincere customer service. Networking might also offer chances to talk about challenging situations and get operational or emotional support (Bui et al., 2023; Hur et al., 2023).

Strategy specific moderation is indicated by the non-significant interaction for automatic emotional regulation. Not all positive emotional labor techniques are strengthened by resilience. The retention benefit of automatic emotional regulation may be comparatively constant across various resilience levels. This is because it already requires little conscious effort. This discovery adds complexity to research that occasionally views resilience as a moderator that benefits everyone (Koole, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2023).

6. Conclusion

The study found that emotional labor strategies had important relationships with frontline staff's job retention in Nairobi City County's classified restaurants. Retention was positively associated with deep acting and automatic emotional regulation but was negatively associated with surface acting. The strongest positive contribution came from automatic emotional regulation. This demonstrates the importance of emotional alignment in stressful customer service positions.

Employee resilience altered some of the relationships between emotional labor strategies and job retention. This directly increased retention. It did not considerably change the relationship between automatic emotional regulation and job retention but it strengthened the beneficial relationship between deep acting and job retention. It also lessened the negative relationship between surface acting and job retention. Therefore, resilience should be considered a crucial yet strategy-specific personal resource.

Classified restaurants can increase employee retention by going beyond the notion that staff members should maintain composure and smile. Healthier coping mechanisms, supportive leaders, rehabilitation opportunities, resilience building and equitable working conditions are all necessary for sustainable retention. The consistent and individualized service that restaurants rely on is supported by these measures. They also safeguard the psychological resources of workers.

7. Study Implications

7.1 Theoretical Implications

The results demonstrate that different emotional labor strategies have varying degrees of psychological resource depletion or conservation. This supports the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989). By showing how employees' reactions to emotionally charged interactions are connected to job attachments and decisions to stay, they also reinforce the affective events theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). By demonstrating that resilience is both a direct retention resource and a strategy specific modulator, the study expands on both hypotheses.

Personal resources do not function consistently across emotional strategies. This is evidenced by the non-significant moderation of automatic emotional regulation and the significant moderation of surface and deep acting. By demonstrating different regression effects for each strategy, the study reinforces the conceptual distinction between surface acting, deep acting and automatic emotional regulation.

7.2 Practical and Managerial Implications

Restaurant management should reduce the necessity for employees to pretend to be happy, especially when interacting with unreasonable and rude customers. Clear standards should also allow frontline staff to report abusive clients to managers without fear of being held accountable. Instead of concentrating just on service scripts, training should emphasize empathy, perspective-taking, emotional reframing, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence. Adaptive coping, learning from failures, peer support, debriefing, and confidence in managing challenging service settings should also be included in resilience-building programs. After emotionally taxing situations, supervisors should perform quick check-ins and, if feasible, offer recuperation time. In order to determine the emotional reasons behind withdrawal, human resource managers should also deploy counselling, employee assistance programs, stay interviews, and exit information. Emotional support treatments should be accompanied by fair compensation,

reasonable workloads, consistent scheduling, recognition, career growth, and employee voice. Finally, as a stable and emotionally sound workforce is essential to the customer experience, restaurants should include employee welfare as part of service sustainability.

7.3 Policy Implications

Guidelines for occupational safety and workplace wellbeing should identify customer aggressiveness and emotional labor as psychosocial hazards in the hotel industry. Second, factors pertaining to employee well-being, equitable scheduling, and protocols for handling abusive customer behaviour should be included in restaurant classification and quality criteria. Thirdly, emotional intelligence, emotional control, resilience, and conflict resolution skills should all be included in hospitality training programs. Fourth, industry groups ought to create useful guidelines for restaurant owners about supervisor support, counselling referrals, and emotional labor management. Last but not least, human resource policies and labor inspections should support fair working hours, enough sleep, and safeguards for staff members who report emotional discomfort or mistreatment by customers.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Because of the cross-sectional nature of the study, emotional labor, resilience, and retention were recorded at a single moment in time. The results show important relationships, but they are unable to determine how the impacts change throughout the course of an employee's whole tenure. Convenience sampling may reduce the sample's representativeness, yet it was required due to staff availability and restaurant work patterns. Social desirability and common method bias may have had an impact on the self-reported quantitative metrics because the major quantitative variables were collected from the same respondents using self-report questionnaires. These possibilities are acknowledged as limitations of the study. The qualitative evidence was mainly obtained from managers and may not fully capture the lived emotional experiences of frontline employees.

Future studies should use longitudinal designs to compare intention to stay with actual turnover. Research should also examine unclassified restaurants, hotels, bars, cafés and catering establishments. Additional studies are needed to establish whether automatic emotional regulation is mainly a personality characteristic, learned competence or product of workplace experience. Researchers may test mediation through emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction or organisational commitment, and moderation by supervisor support, psychological safety, emotional intelligence, organisational justice or work-life balance. Qualitative studies centred on frontline employees would provide deeper evidence about how emotional demands are experienced and managed.

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