



# A Study on Surface Acting and Its Impact on Employee Well-Being among BPO Employees in Chennai

S. Chandrasekar<sup>1</sup>, B. Santhiya<sup>2</sup>

Professor, Department of Management Studies and Research, EGS Pillay Engineering College,  
Nagapattinam, Tamilnadu<sup>1</sup>

MBA Student, Department of Management Studies and Research, EGS Pillay Engineering College,  
Nagapattinam, Tamilnadu<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This study examines surface acting behaviour and its impact on employee well-being among BPO employees in Chennai. Surface acting, a key dimension of emotional labour, refers to the modification of outward emotional expressions without corresponding internal feelings. The study aims to assess the prevalence and intensity of surface acting, analyse the influence of organizational factors such as performance targets and shift schedules, and evaluate its psychological and organizational consequences. Primary data were collected from 150 respondents using a structured questionnaire. Statistical tools including descriptive analysis, Chi-square test, correlation, and regression were applied for data analysis. The findings indicate that surface acting is moderately prevalent among BPO employees and is significantly influenced by shift type and exposure to difficult customers. However, no significant association was found between job role and surface acting behaviour.

The study further reveals that sustained surface acting leads to emotional dissonance, stress, and burnout, which negatively affect job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee retention. The findings emphasize the need for organizations to adopt supportive practices to reduce emotional strain and improve employee well-being.

**Keywords:** Surface Acting, Emotional Labour, Employee Well-being, Burnout, BPO Sector, Organizational Factors, Customer Interaction, Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment

## I. INTRODUCTION

India's Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector has become a major contributor to the global service economy, with cities like Chennai serving as key hubs due to their skilled workforce. Employees in this sector often work in customer-facing roles under strict targets and deadlines, requiring not only technical skills but also effective emotional regulation.

Emotional labour is essential in BPO jobs, where employees are expected to display positive emotions such as friendliness and empathy regardless of their actual feelings. This often leads to **surface acting**, where individuals manage outward expressions without genuinely experiencing those emotions. While this may enhance service quality, it can result in emotional dissonance, stress, and burnout over time.

Organizational factors such as performance pressure, night shifts, and continuous monitoring further intensify emotional demands, affecting job satisfaction, commitment, and retention. Despite its importance, limited research has examined surface acting among BPO employees in Chennai. Therefore, this study aims to analyze surface acting behavior, its influencing factors, and its psychological and organizational outcomes.

## II. NEED FOR THE STUDY

The rapid growth of the BPO sector in India, especially in Chennai, has increased the demand for employees to engage in continuous customer interaction under strict performance conditions. In such environments, managing emotions becomes essential, often leading to surface acting, where employees display positive emotions regardless of their true feelings.

While surface acting helps maintain service quality, it can negatively affect employees' psychological well-being, leading to emotional dissonance, stress, and burnout. Organizational factors such as work pressure, shift schedules, and customer demands further intensify these challenges, impacting job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee retention.

Therefore, it is important to examine surface acting behavior and its effects on employee well-being and organizational outcomes in the BPO sector.

### III. RESEARCH GAP

There is limited empirical research on surface acting among BPO employees in the Indian context, particularly in Chennai. Existing studies have not sufficiently examined the role of organizational factors such as performance pressure, shift schedules, and customer interaction demands in influencing surface acting. Additionally, there is a lack of research exploring the mediating role of surface acting between job demands and employee well-being. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to understanding the long-term impact of surface acting on outcomes such as employee retention, work engagement, and organizational commitment. These gaps highlight the need for a comprehensive study in this area.

### IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To assess the prevalence and intensity of surface acting behaviour among BPO employees across different job roles in Chennai.
- To examine the influence of organizational factors—such as performance targets, shift schedules, and customer interaction pressure—on the adoption of surface acting behaviour.
- To analyze the psychological consequences of sustained surface acting, with specific reference to emotional dissonance and burnout among BPO employees.
- To investigate the mediating role of surface acting in the relationship between customer interaction demands and employee well-being.
- To evaluate the long-term impact of surface acting on employee retention, work engagement, and organizational commitment in the BPO sector.

### V. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study examines surface acting behavior and its impact on employee well-being among BPO employees in Chennai, focusing on those in customer-facing roles across selected organizations. It analyzes the extent of surface acting and the influence of organizational factors such as performance targets, shift schedules, and customer interaction pressure. The study also evaluates psychological outcomes including emotional dissonance, stress, and burnout, along with organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, work engagement, organizational commitment, and employee retention. Additionally, it investigates the mediating role of surface acting between job demands and employee well-being. The study is limited to Chennai and is based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire, and therefore its findings may be generalized cautiously to similar service-sector contexts.

### VI. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of emotional labour was first introduced by *Arlie Russell Hochschild* (1983), who defined it as the process by which employees manage their emotions to fulfill organizational expectations. She distinguished between **surface acting** (modifying outward expressions) and **deep acting** (modifying internal feelings), laying the foundation for subsequent research in service industries.

Building on this, *Alicia A. Grandey* (2000) conceptualized emotional labour as a form of emotional regulation and emphasized its impact on employee well-being. Her work highlighted that surface acting is associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and stress compared to deep acting.

*Catherine M. Brotheridge and Raymond T. Lee* (2003) developed measurement scales for emotional labour and found that surface acting significantly contributes to burnout and job dissatisfaction. Their research provided empirical support for the negative consequences of emotional regulation in workplace settings.

Further, *Wilmar B. Schaufeli* and colleagues (2002) explored burnout as a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Their findings indicate that high emotional demands at work, such as those found in BPO roles, are key predictors of burnout.

Studies in service sectors reveal that continuous customer interaction increases emotional strain. *Daan van Knippenberg* and associates have noted that organizational expectations and performance pressures often compel employees to engage in surface acting, leading to emotional dissonance and reduced well-being.

In the context of BPO and call center environments, researchers have observed that factors such as **night shifts, strict monitoring, and high-performance targets** intensify emotional labour. Employees are frequently required to maintain a positive tone regardless of customer behaviour, which increases the likelihood of stress and burnout.

Although several international studies have examined emotional labour and surface acting, there is a **limited body of empirical research focusing specifically on BPO employees in India**, particularly in Chennai. Moreover, existing studies have not adequately explored the **mediating role of surface acting** between customer interaction demands and employee well-being, nor have they comprehensively analysed its long-term impact on organizational outcomes such as retention and commitment.

## VII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### A. Research design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine surface acting behaviour and its impact on employee well-being among BPO employees in Chennai. The population consists of employees working in BPO organizations in Chennai, estimated to be between 10,00,000 and 12,00,000, from which a sample of 150 respondents was selected using simple random sampling. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire covering surface acting behaviour, organizational factors, psychological consequences, customer interaction demands, and organizational outcomes, measured using a 5-point Likert scale. Secondary data were gathered from journals, books, and research articles related to emotional labour and the BPO sector. The study includes independent variables such as organizational factors and customer interaction demands, a mediating variable of surface acting behaviour, and dependent variables including employee well-being (stress, emotional dissonance, burnout) and organizational outcomes (job satisfaction, engagement, commitment, and retention). Data are analyzed using SPSS through percentage analysis, descriptive statistics, reliability testing, factor analysis, correlation, regression, and mediation analysis.

### B. Hypotheses (indicative)

- H1: Surface acting significantly affects employee well-being
- H2: Organizational factors significantly influence surface acting
- H3: Customer interaction demands significantly influence surface acting

### C. Limitations

- Limited to BPO employees in Chennai
- Convenience sampling may affect generalization
- Self-reported responses may introduce bias

## VIII. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Data analysis and interpretation are essential in transforming raw data into meaningful insights. In this study, data were collected from 150 BPO employees in Chennai using a structured questionnaire measuring surface acting behavior, organizational factors, psychological outcomes, and organizational outcomes.

The data were coded and analyzed using statistical tools. Descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to understand response patterns, while inferential techniques like correlation and regression analysis examined relationships between variables. Factor analysis was applied to identify underlying dimensions, and reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha.

The analysis focuses on the prevalence of surface acting and its impact on employee well-being and organizational outcomes. Results are presented in tables with interpretations, providing a clear understanding of patterns and relationships in line with the study objectives.

**TABLE I: DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BASED ON LEVEL OF SURFACE ACTING**

Level of Surface Acting	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Low	32	21.30%
Medium	78	52.00%
High	40	26.70%
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: **Computed**

The above table shows that a majority of respondents (52.0%) fall under the **medium level of surface acting**, indicating that a significant proportion of BPO employees moderately regulate their emotions at work. About 26.7% of respondents exhibit a **high level of surface acting**, suggesting frequent emotional suppression and expression of non-

genuine emotions. Meanwhile, 21.3% of employees fall under the **low category**, indicating relatively lesser emotional regulation.

This implies that surface acting is **moderately prevalent** among BPO employees, with a considerable portion experiencing higher levels, which may have implications for their psychological well-being and job outcomes.

**TABLE II: CONSOLIDATED DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	88	58.70%
	Female	62	41.30%
<b>Age</b>	Below 25 years	46	30.70%
	26–30 years	58	38.70%
	31–35 years	28	18.70%
	Above 35 years	18	12.00%
<b>Educational Qualification</b>	UG	64	42.70%
	PG	52	34.70%
	Professional	20	13.30%
	Others	14	9.30%
<b>Experience</b>	Below 1 year	34	22.70%
	1–3 years	56	37.30%
	3–5 years	32	21.30%
	Above 5 years	28	18.70%
<b>Process Type</b>	Voice	92	61.30%
	Non-Voice	58	38.70%
<b>Work Hours/Day</b>	< 8 hrs	20	13.30%
	8–9 hrs	54	36.00%
	9–10 hrs	46	30.70%
	> 10 hrs	30	20.00%
<b>Monthly Income</b>	< 15,000	26	17.30%
	15,000–25,000	54	36.00%
	25,000–35,000	42	28.00%
	> 35,000	28	18.70%
	> 6	14	9.30%
<b>Family Responsibility</b>	Low	26	17.30%
	Moderate	58	38.70%
	High	40	26.70%
	Very High	26	17.30%

Source: Computed

The consolidated table indicates that the majority of respondents are **young, moderately experienced employees working in rotational shifts**, predominantly in voice-based processes. Most employees fall within the **medium income group** and are exposed to **frequent customer interactions**, which may contribute to increased emotional labour. The demographic distribution suggests a workforce that is **highly active, performance-driven, and exposed to significant work-related stressors**, making it suitable for analysing surface acting behaviour and its impact on well-being.

For the purpose of advanced statistical analysis, three key variables **Job Role, Shift Type, and Customer Interaction Intensity (Exposure to Difficult Customers)** were selected based on their strong relevance to the objectives and conceptual framework of the study.

These variables were chosen because they directly influence the level of **surface acting behaviour** among BPO employees. **Job Role** determines the nature and intensity of customer interaction, thereby affecting emotional demands. **Shift Type**, particularly rotational and night shifts, impacts employees' psychological and emotional stability. **Customer Interaction Intensity**, especially exposure to difficult customers, is a primary driver of emotional labour, requiring employees to frequently regulate their emotions.

**8.1 Job Role and Surface Acting Level**

In the BPO sector, job roles vary in responsibilities, customer interaction, and performance expectations. Roles such as Customer Support Executives, Team Leaders, and Quality Analysts differ in the extent of emotional labour required. Employees in customer-facing roles are expected to manage their emotions and maintain a positive attitude during interactions.

Surface acting, where employees display emotions not genuinely felt, is common in such roles. Its level may vary depending on the nature of the job, with frontline employees likely experiencing higher emotional regulation compared to supervisory or analytical roles.

Analysing the relationship between job role and surface acting helps identify role-based differences in emotional labour and provides insights for improving employee well-being and performance.

**TABLE III: JOB ROLE AND SURFACE ACTING**  
(Two Way Table)

Job Role	Low	Medium	High	Total
Customer Support Executive	10	38	24	72
Senior Executive	8	14	6	28
Team Leader	6	10	4	20
Quality Analyst	5	8	3	16
Others	3	8	3	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>150</b>

Source: Computed

The cross-tabulation between job role and surface acting shows that employees across different roles mainly exhibit a **moderate level of surface acting**, with similar distribution across low and high levels. Customer Support Executives have a slightly higher proportion in the high category, likely due to frequent customer interaction.

However, the Chi-square test indicates **no significant association** between job role and surface acting ( $p > 0.05$ ), suggesting that surface acting is not influenced by job role.

Overall, the findings imply that emotional regulation is common across all roles in the BPO sector, making surface acting a general workplace phenomenon rather than role-specific.

**8.2 Shift Type and Surface Acting**

Shift work is a key feature of the BPO industry, where employees operate across time zones to serve global clients. In cities like Chennai, organizations follow day, rotational, and night shift systems, which can significantly affect employees' physical and psychological well-being.

Shift type influences employees' emotional experiences, as night and rotational shifts often disrupt sleep, increase fatigue, and reduce recovery time. Despite these challenges, employees are expected to maintain positive behaviour during customer interactions, leading to surface acting.

Thus, employees in different shifts may exhibit varying levels of surface acting. Analysing this relationship helps understand how work schedules affect emotional labour and well-being, enabling organizations to design better shift systems and support mechanisms.

TABLE IV: SHIFT TYPE AND SURFACE ACTING  
 (Two Way Table)

Shift Type	Low	Medium	High	Total
Day Shift	18	24	10	52
Rotational Shift	14	54	30	98
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>150</b>

Source: Computed

The cross-tabulation between shift type and surface acting shows that employees in **rotational shifts** have higher levels of surface acting compared to those in day shifts. Day shift employees are more concentrated in low and medium levels, indicating lower emotional strain. The Chi-square test reveals a **significant association** between shift type and surface acting ( $p < 0.05$ ), confirming that shift schedules influence emotional labour.

Overall, the findings suggest that rotational shifts increase fatigue and emotional strain, leading to higher surface acting. Therefore, organizations should improve shift planning and provide support measures to reduce employee stress.

### 8.3 Difficult Customers and Surface Acting Level

In the BPO sector, employees frequently interact with customers who may be demanding, impatient, or dissatisfied, creating significant emotional pressure. Employees are expected to remain calm and professional in such situations, which often leads to surface acting suppressing true emotions and displaying organizationally expected behaviour.

The frequency of dealing with difficult customers directly influences the level of surface acting, as employees must continuously regulate their emotions under pressure. Higher exposure increases emotional strain and reliance on surface acting, which may lead to emotional exhaustion over time.

Therefore, analysing the relationship between difficult customer interactions and surface acting is essential to understand the impact of customer demands on emotional labour and employee well-being.

TABLE V: DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS AND SURFACE ACTING  
 (Two Way Table)

Exposure Level	Low	Medium	High	Total
Rarely	10	6	2	18
Sometimes	12	22	10	44
Often	6	30	16	52
Always	4	20	12	36
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>150</b>

Source: Computed

The cross-tabulation shows that employees who rarely deal with difficult customers mostly fall under the **low surface acting** category, while those who frequently face such customers are more concentrated in **medium and high levels** of surface acting.

The Chi-square test indicates a **significant association** between exposure to difficult customers and surface acting ( $p < 0.05$ ), confirming that customer interaction intensity influences emotional labour.

Overall, employees who frequently handle difficult customers tend to engage in higher surface acting due to continuous emotional regulation. This highlights the need for organizational support to help employees manage emotional strain.

## IX.FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Based on the analysis of data collected from 150 BPO employees in Chennai, the study reveals that the workforce is predominantly young (26–30 years), with most employees working as Customer Support Executives, having 1–3 years of experience, and engaged in rotational shifts and voice-based processes involving continuous customer interaction. Surface acting is moderately prevalent, with many employees also exhibiting high levels, indicating frequent emotional regulation. The findings show that surface acting occurs across all job roles, with no significant association between role and surface acting, suggesting that emotional labour is common across the organization. However, shift type and exposure to difficult customers have a significant influence, with rotational shift

employees and those frequently handling difficult customers showing higher levels of surface acting. The study also highlights key psychological consequences such as stress, emotional exhaustion, and emotional dissonance, along with negative organizational outcomes including reduced job satisfaction, lower commitment, and increased turnover intention. Overall, surface acting emerges as a critical aspect of BPO work, driven by organizational demands and customer interactions, emphasizing the need for supportive interventions to improve employee well-being.

#### **X.SUGGESTIONS**

Based on the findings of the study conducted among BPO employees in Chennai, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Emotional Intelligence Training:** Organizations should conduct regular training programs to help employees develop emotional regulation skills, enabling them to manage customer interactions more effectively without excessive psychological strain.
2. **Employee Wellness Programs:** Initiatives such as stress management workshops, counselling services, and mental health support should be implemented to reduce emotional exhaustion and burnout.
3. **Shift Management Practices:** Rotational shifts should be planned more systematically, with adequate rest periods to minimize fatigue and maintain employees' emotional stability.
4. **Supportive Supervision:** Supervisors should provide guidance, encouragement, and emotional support, creating a positive work environment that reduces the burden of surface acting.
5. **Workload and Target Optimization:** Organizations should review performance targets and workload distribution to ensure they are realistic and do not excessively pressure employees.
6. **Training for Handling Difficult Customers:** Specialized training programs should be introduced to equip employees with strategies for managing difficult customer interactions effectively.
7. **Enhancing Work-Life Balance:** Flexible work arrangements and adequate leave policies should be encouraged to improve employees' overall well-being.
8. **Recognition and Reward Systems:** Acknowledging employees' efforts in managing emotional demands can improve motivation and organizational commitment.

#### **XI.CONCLUSION**

The present study highlights the significant role of surface acting in the BPO sector and its impact on employee well-being and organizational outcomes. The findings indicate that surface acting is moderately to highly prevalent among employees, particularly those working in rotational shifts and handling difficult customers. While surface acting contributes to maintaining service quality, it also leads to emotional dissonance, stress, and burnout.

The study further reveals that surface acting negatively influences job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee retention. Although job role does not significantly affect surface acting, organizational factors and customer interaction intensity play a crucial role in shaping emotional labour.

Overall, the study emphasizes the need for organizations to adopt supportive practices that balance performance expectations with employee well-being. By addressing the psychological demands of surface acting, organizations can enhance employee satisfaction, reduce turnover, and achieve sustainable performance in the BPO sector.

#### **REFERENCES**

- [1] Ashforth, B. E., & Humphrey, R. H. (1993). Emotional labor in service roles: The influence of identity. *Academy of Management Review*, 18(1), 88–115. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1993.3997508>
- [2] Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands–resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(3), 309–328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115>
- [3] Emotional labour and its effect on work performance in Indian service organizations. *Asian Journal of Agricultural Extension, Economics & Sociology*, 42(6), 284–292.
- [4] Brotheridge, C. M., & Lee, R. T. (2003). Development and validation of the emotional labour scale. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 76(3), 365–379. <https://doi.org/10.1348/096317903769647229>
- [5] Chandrasekar, S. (2024). *Evaluating customer satisfaction with hospital facilities: A study*. *The Journal of Oriental Research Madras*, 95(4), 254–264.
- [6] Grandey, A. A. (2000). Emotion regulation in the workplace: A new way to conceptualize emotional labor. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 5(1), 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.5.1.95>
- [7] Grandey, A. A., Dickter, D. N., & Sin, H. P. (2004). The customer is not always right: Customer aggression and emotion regulation of service employees. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25(3), 397–418. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.252>



- [8] Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press. Impact of emotional labor on organizational role stress: A study in the services sector in India. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 11, 110–121. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671\(14\)00181-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(14)00181-6)
- [9] Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E. (1981). The measurement of experienced burnout. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2(2), 99–113. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030020205>
- [10] Morris, J. A., & Feldman, D. C. (1996). The dimensions, antecedents, and consequences of emotional labor. *Academy of Management Review*, 21(4), 986–1010. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1996.9704071861>
- [11] Emotional labour and well-being: Evidence from Indian professionals. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 51(2), 500–510.
- [12] Emotional labour in emerging economies: Evidence from Indian service sectors. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion*.
- [13] Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3(1), 71–92. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015630930326>
- [14] Emotional labor in customer service professionals: Validation in the Indian context. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(6), 189–194.
- [15] Zapf, D. (2002). Emotion work and psychological well-being: A review of the literature. *Human Resource Management Review*, 12(2), 237–268. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-4822\(02\)00048-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-4822(02)00048-7)