


# The Influence of Emotional Labor of Service Employees on Customer Service Misbehavior and Repurchase Intention: The Role of Face

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the emotional labor of service employees affects customer service misbehavior and repurchase intention and to explore the mechanism and boundary conditions.

**Methods:** We collected a total of 252 pairs of employee–customer valid matching data and used SPSS 24.0 and Mplus7.0 statistical analysis tools to perform statistical analysis and hypothesis testing.

**Results:** The results showed that employees' surface acting has a significant positive impact on customer misbehavior and negative impact on repurchase intention via perceived face threat, while deep acting has a significant negative impact on customer misbehavior and positive impact on repurchase intention via perceived face threat. And customer face threat sensitivity not only moderates the relationship between service employee emotional labor and customer perceived face threat but also moderates the indirect effect of surface acting on customer misbehavior and repurchase intention via customer perceived face threat.

**Conclusion:** Based on face theory, this study explained how and when emotional labor of service employees may affect customer service misbehavior and repurchase intention. These results contribute to the emotional labor and customer service misbehavior literature by introducing perceived face threat as an underlying mechanism and face threat sensitivity as a boundary condition. In addition, this study suggests that service-oriented enterprises should pay attention to the management and guidance of employees' emotional labor and try their best to let employees show deep acting rather than surface acting.

**Keywords:** emotional labor, customer perceived face threat, face threat sensitivity, customer misbehavior, repurchase intention

## Introduction

There is a saying in the service sector that goes, “the customer is king”. Companies require their staff to control their emotions and show positive mood during the service process under the guiding principle of “customers foremost”. According to some studies, showing positive emotion by service staff is a crucial and successful tactic for leaving a lasting impression on customers.<sup>1,2</sup> According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, from 2016 to 2026, approximately 90% of new jobs will be added in the service delivery sector, which will greatly increase the occurrence of emotional labor.<sup>3</sup> Emotional labor refers to the management of emotions as part of professional duties.<sup>4</sup> And in order to better understand how service businesses might provide their customers with “service with a smile” by controlling the emotional performance of their employees, theoretical scholars and management practitioners have given emotional labor a great deal of attention.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars now generally agree to categorize emotional labor strategies into two categories: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting refers to faking or amplifying emotions and pretending not to really feel them, while deep acting refers to attempting to modify felt emotions in order to subsequently engage in authentic displays of emotions. According to a survey of the literature, scholars have focused on three aspects of the outcomes of emotional labor strategies: the employees themselves, the company, and the customer.<sup>6</sup> However, the impact of emotional labor on customers has been

less explored than the first two.<sup>6</sup> This gap is surprising because the personal interaction between service employees and customers is an important part of the service experience<sup>7,8</sup> and the role of emotions in influencing social processes<sup>9</sup> provides reason to believe that employees' emotional regulation during service interactions affects customer outcomes. Furthermore, some studies on customer outcomes have only on the examination of customer satisfaction,<sup>10</sup> customer loyalty,<sup>11</sup> and customer incivility<sup>12</sup> while neglecting other important outcome variables, for example, customer misbehavior and customer repurchase intention. On the one hand, customer misbehavior has a more pernicious effect than incivility, and on the other hand, it is the customer repurchase intention that is a direct indicator of the success of the service. Only by understanding the relationship between service employees' emotional labor and customer misbehavior and repurchase intention, companies can better develop strategies to better serve their employees and improve organizational performance. Therefore, we believe that it is important to study emotional labor of service employees and customer misbehavior and repurchase intention, and we raise the following research question: Whether (main effect), how (mediating mechanism), and when (boundary condition) will service employee emotional labor arouse customer misbehavior and repurchase intention?

To address the above research question, this study uses face theory to examine the role of employee face threat perception and face threat sensitivity in the relationship between service employees' emotional labor and customer misbehavior and repurchase intention. First, according to face theory, during interpersonal encounters, individuals evaluate their face gain or loss by words and behaviors. They then react to these informational cues with face-related behaviors.<sup>13,14</sup> Thus, individuals' perceptions of their own face help to answer how customer emotional labor affects customer misbehavior and repurchase intention. Face threat reflects individuals' negative evaluations and disapproving images of their current state.<sup>15</sup> Individuals tend to view the negative events they experience as triggers for their face threat. Based on face theory and combined with emotional labor strategies, we argue that service employees' surface acting is perceived as disguised and false, which are then identified by customers as disrespectful and perceived as loss of face (face threat), which leads to retaliatory (eg, misbehavior) and defensive (eg, reduced repurchase intention) behaviors. In contrast, the service employees' deep acting is perceived as respectful to the customer and will not cause the customer to perceive a loss of face, which in turn would reduce customer misbehavior and increase repurchase intention. Therefore, we suggest that service employee emotional labor strategies may further affect customer misbehavior and repurchase intention by inducing face threat perception.

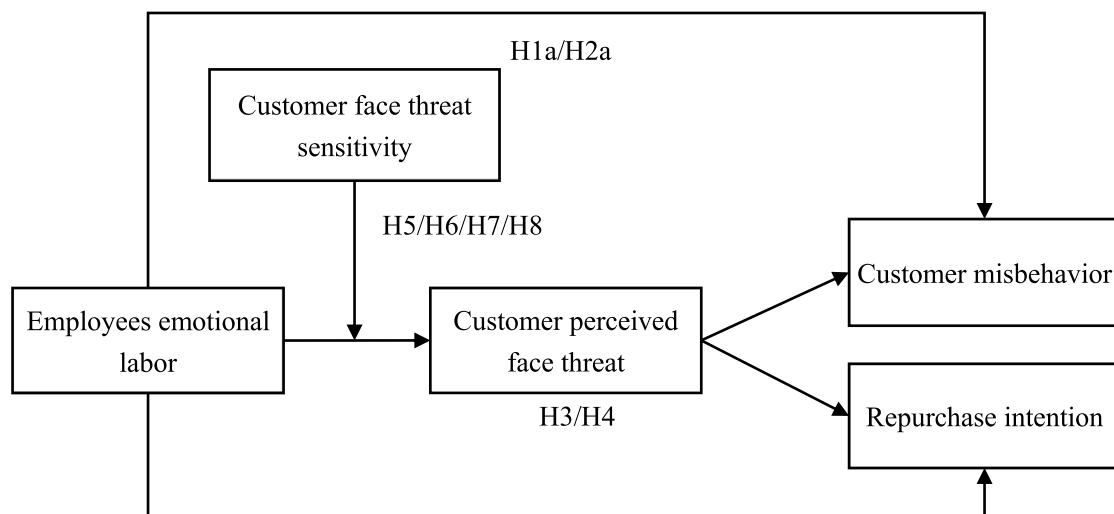
Second, face theory suggests that event stimuli are not the only prerequisite for determining face threat and that the actors' traits (eg, face threat sensitivity) are also key factors influencing his or her face threat.<sup>16</sup> In other words, customers' cognitive judgments and subsequent behavioral responses to face events are influenced by their face threat sensitivity. Specifically, when customers' face threat sensitivity is high rather than low, they are more concerned with the perception of "losing face" during interpersonal interactions, and when they perceive that the surface acting of service employees leads to higher face threat perception, while the deep acting of service employees leads to lower face threat perception. Therefore, we used customer face threat sensitivity as a boundary condition for the "event-cognition-behavior" pathway described above.

In summary, this study explores the mechanism (face threat perception) and boundary condition (face threat sensitivity) of the effect of service employees' emotional labor strategies on customer misbehavior and repurchase intention. Our theoretical model is shown in Figure 1. In addition, a paired sample of service employees and customers from China will be selected to test our hypothesis like previous studies, as customers' face perceptions are stronger in China and fit our research context better.<sup>17,18</sup>

## Theory and Hypotheses

### Face and Face Theory

The concept of the face is widely employed in Chinese daily life and can be linked to Confucian values in Chinese culture,<sup>19</sup> which are also valued in other cultures.<sup>20</sup> Face highlights the need for social acceptability in humans.<sup>21</sup> Face, in general, refers to a person's assertion of their own positive self-worth, which is correlated with the social value that is associated with their public persona, reputation, status, and other elements.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 1** Research model.

The face theory is interested in how individual behavioral decisions are influenced by faces.<sup>14</sup> Face, which is dependent on other people's attitudes and behaviors, stands for the social part of the self-concept.<sup>23</sup> The face theory contends that language and conduct used in interpersonal communication are frequently the precursors of threatening individual faces (also known as face threat) and that people often react to these hazardous information cues with actions connected to faces.<sup>13</sup>

The stimulus-cognition-response (SCR) model, which aids in the analysis of the psychological processes by which people assess possible face events and respond to them with associated actions, has also been used by researchers to further develop the face theory. For instance, strikingly unfavorable words, actions, and occurrences are frequently the external triggers that make individuals worry about their appearance. When individuals are aroused, they decode and analyze the entire circumstance, set criteria, evaluate and summarize their face gain or loss, and finally establish criteria. Finally, individuals may engage in a variety of preventive and corrective behaviors to avoid losing or regaining face, or even to increase face.<sup>24,25</sup> In addition, the facial threat nature of the above verbal/behavioral stimulus information is highly dependent on context and individual traits.

In the process of interaction between service employees and customers, the emotional labor of employees, as a stimulating event, will cause customers to judge their own face. When employees perform surface acting, customers will feel that they are not respected, resulting in face threat. When employees perform deep acting, customers will not feel disrespected and face threat is low, which will affect customers' behavioral responses (including customer misbehavior and repurchase intention). In conclusion, the face theory provides an appropriate theoretical framework for exploring the impact of emotional labor of service employees on customer behavioral responses. In the following, based on the face theory, we will investigate whether, how and when emotional labor of service employees affects the behavioral responses of customers.

## Employees' Emotional Labor and Customer Misbehavior and Repurchase Intention

Emotional labor refers to the behavior that employees show appropriate emotional expression at work according to the emotional expression rules required by the organization.<sup>26</sup> Emotional labor includes two dimensions, namely Surface Acting and Deep Acting.<sup>27</sup> Pugh<sup>28</sup> emphasized how quickly customers can be affected by the emotional labor of frontline employees in the process of service interaction. On the one hand, like with surface acting, employees' emotional outward displays do not always reflect their true, inside feelings, which has a detrimental effect on customers.<sup>29</sup> Customers will see that service professionals are masking and fabricating their emotions when they utilize surface acting, leading them to believe that they have not been treated with the decency and respect that they should have. Hence, customers may misbehave and have lower repurchase intentions. On the other hand, from the standpoint of deep acting, it is a sincere

acting behavior, which has a favorable effect on customers. Groth et al<sup>30</sup> found that when the emotional expression provided by employees to customers is consistent with their inner true emotional state, the sincere service of employees will positively affect customers by influencing their evaluation of service quality. To put it another way, customers feel more appreciated in the customer service process and more sincere and credible when they sense that employees are using deep acting tactics. As a result, this will immediately decrease consumer misbehavior and raise their likelihood of making another transaction. Based on the above discussion, this study puts forward the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Employees' surface acting is (a) positively related to customer misbehavior and (b) negatively related to repurchase intention.

Hypothesis 2: Employees' deep acting is (a) negatively related to customer misbehavior and (b) positively related to repurchase intention.

## The Mediating Role of Customer Perceived Face Threat

Perceived face threat refers to the negative self-perception perceived by customers due to some social feedback.<sup>31</sup> According to the face theory, the emotional labor strategy of service employees will affect the perceived face threat of customers. Specifically, the surface acting of service employees will increase the perceived face threat of customers, while the deep acting will reduce the perceived face threat of customers. Since customers will feel different emotional states required by employees' inner emotions and emotional display rules after interaction with the surface employees, customers are prone to feel disrespected, neglected and underestimated,<sup>32</sup> and other customers in the process of service due to the presence of, this can lead to customers feel "no face". This challenges the customer's original self-perception, which in turn poses a threat to the customer's face.<sup>33</sup> In other words, surface acting sends low value negative interpersonal information feedback to customers, and receiving negative feedback may trigger customers' perception of face threat. However, the deep acting of employees is on the contrary. When customers experience sincere and heartfelt services in the process of service interaction, they will have internal feelings of being respected and valued and feel that they have "face".<sup>34</sup> This enables customers to improve their self-perception in the process of interaction, thus reducing the perceived face threat of customers.

According to the face theory, when an individual's face is threatened, the psychological need to save face and prevent further loss of face will form his strong social motivation. Individuals engage in retaliatory and defensive behaviors to maintain their original self-perception and face-saving status. Therefore, we selected customer misbehavior as the representative of retaliatory behavior, and customer repurchase intention as the representative of defensive behavior. On the one hand, when facing the face threat, customers will try their best to do something in line with their identity to save their face. Especially in the interaction between customers and service employees, compared with service employees, customers tend to be the party with higher status, so they will show negative attitudes and behaviors (such as misbehavior) to service employees to express their higher status. This inference is similar to the interaction between leaders and employees in the workplace. We can often see that leaders with high status will maintain their self-perception and face by taking negative behaviors such as rejection and criticism when they feel threatened by employees with low status.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, when the customers perceive the face threat from the service employees, they will save their face by carrying out the retaliatory behavior of misbehavior to the employees. On the other hand, when facing face threat, customers will also take defensive actions to prevent further loss of face. The so-called defensive behavior is to reduce and reduce the interaction between the two sides, for example, the customer can ask for another service employee or directly change the restaurant, etc. Therefore, we infer that after customers are threatened with face, in order to prevent their face from being threatened again, they will choose less to consume in this restaurant again in future consumption choices, that is, they will reduce their repurchase intention. Similarly, this inference can also be reflected in the leader-employee interaction in the workplace. When perceiving the threat from an employee, the leader will transfer the employee from the team and reduce the number of interactions to prevent his face from being threatened again. Based on the above discussion, this study puts forward the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: Customer perceived face threat mediates the relationship between surface acting and (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention.

Hypothesis 4: Customer perceived face threat mediates the relationship between deep acting and (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention.

## The Moderating Role of Face Threat Sensitivity

Face threat sensitivity (FTS) refers to the likelihood that a person has a face threat response to a negative event.<sup>36</sup> As Tynan<sup>37</sup> pointed out, individuals have different thresholds for whether they will react negatively to a potential face or self-image threat. Thus, individual's sensitivity to threat is a stable personality trait.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, individuals with high FTS pay more attention to their own face and image, and tend to have a lower threshold of face threat from negative events that may be detrimental to them,<sup>36</sup> which leads to the fact that individuals with high FTS are more likely to generate face threat perception when facing negative events. On the contrary, individuals with low FTS are less likely to develop face threat perception when faced with negative events or potential threats to their self-image.<sup>37</sup>

According to face theory, we believe that FTS plays a moderating role between emotional labor of service employees and face threat perception of customers. Specifically, when customers have high FTS, they are particularly sensitive to the threat of their own face or self-image, and they will feel "lose face" as long as they perceive the disrespectful behavior from others. As a result, when they perceive surface acting from service employees, they feel more disrespected, undervalued, and threatened to their own face. In other words, when customers with high FTS perceive the surface acting of service employees, they will increase their worry about face or self-image and believe that such behavior poses a more serious threat to their face or self-image (ie, the higher the perceived face threat).<sup>38</sup> Customers with low FTS are less sensitive to their own face threat, and even if they perceive surface acting from service employee, they do not perceive their image as being challenged or threatened, or are less concerned about the external environment's evaluation of them, which can reduce the impact of service employees' surface acting on customers' perception of face threat to a certain extent. Similarly, when customers with high FTS face deep acting from service employees, they pay more attention to their face and image, so when service employees show respect and attention to them, their perception of face threat is lower. That is, in the case of high FTS, deep acting of service employees has a stronger impact on face threat perception. On the contrary, when customers with low FTS are faced with the deep acting from service employees, they will not pay much attention to whether the service employees respect and value them, so the impact of deep acting on the face threat of customers is also weak. Based on the above discussion, this study puts forward the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: Customer face threat sensitivity moderates the relationship between employees' surface acting and customer perceived face threat, that is, when customers' face threat sensitivity is higher, the above relationship is more positive.

Hypothesis 6: Customer face threat sensitivity moderates the relationship between employees' deep acting and customer perceived face threat, that is, when customers' face threat sensitivity is higher, the above relationship is more negative.

## An Integrative Model

Based on Hypotheses 3–6, this study further speculated that the indirect effects of employees' emotional labor (surface acting and deep acting) on customers' misbehavior and repurchase intention through customers' perceived face threat may also be moderated by customers' FTS. In other words, compared with customers with low FTS, customers with high FTS will experience more face threat perception in the face of surface acting by service employees, and then engage in more customer misbehavior and report less repurchase intention. In the face of the deep acting of service employees, they will experience less face threat perception, and then engage in less customer misbehavior and report more repurchase intention. Based on the above discussion, this study puts forward the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 7: Customer face threat sensitivity moderates the indirect effect of employees' surface acting on (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention via perceived face threat.

Hypothesis 8: Customer face threat sensitivity moderates the indirect effect of employees' deep acting on (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention via perceived face threat.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

In this study, we adopted a simple random sampling method to select the enterprises willing to participate in our research. Questionnaires were used to collect data, which mainly came from a number of service-oriented enterprises in Central China. With the rapid development of social economy, the proportion of people eating out is increasing. And the intensifying competition in the catering industry encourages catering enterprises to provide better services, which makes emotional labor become an important part of front-line employees' work.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, in this study, employees of catering enterprises and customers were selected as the research participants. In order to reduce the common method bias, the customer-employee pair method was used to collect data. The questionnaires are distributed in the form of matching, and each set of questionnaires includes a customer questionnaire and an employee questionnaire. In the employee survey questionnaire, employees rated customer misbehavior, and in the customer survey questionnaire, customers rated employees' emotional labor and reported their perceived face threat, face threat sensitivity and repurchase intention.

The specific investigation process was as follows: First, we recruited college students as research assistants to help with data collection. At the same time, they were given unified training to standardize the questionnaire collection process. Then, the author contacted the catering enterprises through the cooperation network, and the research assistant came to the site to collect data. The data collection time is mainly distributed from 11:00 to 14:00 and 17:00 to 20:00, because most customers will choose to eat in these two periods. Second, before the survey, the research assistant briefed the participants on the purpose of the study, and promised to keep the survey results strictly confidential and only used for academic research. Finally, the data were collected by filling in and collecting the questionnaire on site, and the participants were given small gifts as feedback.

A total of 300 pairs of employee and customer questionnaires were distributed in this study, and 267 pairs of employee-customer matching questionnaires were collected. After eliminating the invalid questionnaires that failed the attention check and had more blanks, 252 pairs of employee-customer questionnaires were successfully matched, and the effective rate was 84.0%. In all samples, the proportion of male and female customers was 50.0%, the average age of customers was 30.61 years old ( $SD = 6.51$ ), and 78.9% had received college education or above.

### Measures

Our study selected mature scales published in top international journals, and these scales were proven to have good reliability and validity. As the original scales of our study were developed in English, we followed translation and back-translation procedure to ensure the accuracy of translating English items into Chinese. Referring to previous high-level journal articles,<sup>40,41</sup> employees rated the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Specific measurement items of the scale are shown in Table 1.

### Emotional Labor

Customers rated the six-item scale developed by Brotheridge and Grandey.<sup>42</sup> Surface acting and deep acting each have three items. A sample item is "I feel that the employee resists expressing his/her true feelings" for surface acting ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and "I feel that the employee make an effort to actually feel the emotions that he/she need to display to others" for deep acting ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ).

### Perceived Face Threat

Customers rated the perceived face threat by using a three-item scale adapted by Zhu et al.<sup>43</sup> A sample item is "The service employees' action would show disrespect towards me" ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).



**Table I** Reliability and Validity Analysis Results

Variables	Items	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Surface acting	SA1	0.84	0.91	0.78
	SA2	0.90		
	SA3	0.90		
Deep acting	DA1	0.75	0.87	0.70
	DA2	0.88		
	DA3	0.87		
Perceived face threat	PFT1	0.89	0.89	0.73
	PFT2	0.87		
	PFT3	0.81		
Face threat sensitivity	FTS1	0.89	0.89	0.73
	FTS2	0.89		
	FTS3	0.79		
Customer misbehavior	CMB1	0.74	0.86	0.51
	CMB2	0.66		
	CMB3	0.62		
	CMB4	0.81		
	CMB5	0.80		
	CMB6	0.64		
Repurchase intention	RPI1	0.91	0.91	0.83
	RPI2	0.91		

## Face Threat Sensitivity

Customers rated the face threat sensitivity by using the three-item scale developed by White et al<sup>36</sup>. A sample item is “My feelings are hurt easily” ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

## Customer Misbehavior

Service employees rated customer misbehavior by using six-item scale developed by Daunt and Harris<sup>44</sup> and used by Taheri et al<sup>45</sup> and Loi et al<sup>46</sup>. A sample item is “The customer complained without genuine cause” ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ).

## Repurchase Intention

Customers rated the repurchase intention by using the two-item scale developed by Grewal et al.<sup>47</sup> Two items are “I will visit this restaurant again in the future” and “I will recommend this restaurant to a friend” ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

## Control Variables

Previous studies showed that customers’ demographic variables would affect customer misbehavior and repurchase intention.<sup>48</sup> Thus, customers’ gender (1 = male, 0 = female), age (fill in the actual age) and education (1 = Junior high school or below, 2 = high school, 3 = junior college, 4 = bachelor’s degree, 5 = master’s degree or above) were used as control variables.

## Results

### Reliability and Validity Analysis

First of all, we check whether the data conform to the normal distribution. By drawing the P-P graph, we find that the data conform to the normal distribution requirements.

**Table 2** Confirmatory Factor Analyses Results

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	$\Delta\chi^2/\Delta df$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Six-factor model (SA; DA; PFT; FTS; CMB; RPI)	190.59	104	1.83	/	0.95	0.94	0.06
Five-factor model (SA+DA; PFT; FTS; CMB; RPI)	305.25	109	2.80	114.66*** (5)	0.89	0.87	0.09
Four-factor model (SA+DA+PFT; FTS; CMB; RPI)	484.67	113	4.29	294.08*** (9)	0.80	0.76	0.11
Three-factor model (SA+DA+PFT+FTS; CMB; RPI)	741.34	116	6.39	550.75*** (12)	0.66	0.61	0.15
Two-factor model I (SA+DA+PFT+FTS+CMB; RPI)	969.03	118	8.21	778.44*** (14)	0.54	0.47	0.17
One-factor model (SA+DA+PFT+FTS+CMB+RPI)	1070.66	119	9.00	880.07*** (15)	0.49	0.42	0.18

**Notes:** "+" means that two factors are combined into one factor. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Abbreviations:** SA, surface acting; DA, deep acting; PFT, perceived face threat; FTS, face threat sensitivity; CMB, customer misbehavior; RPI, repurchase intention;  $\chi^2$ , Chi-square; df, degree of freedom; CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation.

Then, we evaluated construct reliability based on Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient and composite reliability (CR). Table 1 reveals that all the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients and CR values were greater than the threshold value of 0.70.<sup>49,50</sup>

Finally, following prior studies,<sup>51,52</sup> we evaluated the convergent and discriminant validity of our key variables, not including control variables. For convergent validity, we assessed one statistic: average variance extracted (AVE). We calculated the AVE by using standardized factor loadings. As shown in Table 1, each item's standardized factor loading was higher than the threshold value of 0.60,<sup>53</sup> and all the AVE values exceeded the threshold value of 0.50.<sup>54</sup>

To verify the discriminant validity of the six focal latent variables in our research model, we performed a series of single-level confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using Mplus7.0. Standard errors may have increased due to the huge number of measurement items for some variables and the large number of parameters that needed to be estimated.<sup>55</sup> As a result, variables with more than five items were randomly packaged into three items. The findings in Table 2 showed that the six-factor model we proposed fit the data well ( $\chi^2 = 190.59$ ,  $df = 104$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.95, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.94, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06). In addition, the CFA results showed that the six variables had excellent discriminant validity because the six-factor model was significantly superior to the other alternative models.

## Common Method Bias Testing

We must examine the data's common method bias. The method in this study is to use the Harmon one-way test to control for common method bias by combining the items from all the variables in an unrotated factor analysis. This revealed that the first factor explained only 27.76% of the variance, which is less than half of the cumulative variance (70.51%), indicating that this study did not have a serious common method bias issue.

## Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 displays descriptive statistics and variable relationships. According to Table 3, service employees' surface acting was positively correlated with customer misbehavior ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and negatively correlated with repurchase intention ( $r = -0.34$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); while deep acting was negatively correlated with customer misbehavior ( $r = -0.13$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and positively correlated with repurchase intention ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, service employees' surface acting was positively correlated with customer perceived face threat ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while deep acting was negatively correlated with customer perceived face threat ( $r = -0.39$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). And customer perceived face threat was positively correlated with customer misbehavior ( $r = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and negatively correlated with repurchase intention ( $r = -0.37$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

## Hypothesis Testing

A path analysis model was used to test our hypotheses in Mplus7.0. Table 4 and Figure 2 provide the hypothesized path analysis results.

Hypothesis 1 proposes that employees' surface acting is (a) positively related to customer misbehavior and (b) negatively related to repurchase intention. And Hypothesis 2 proposes that employees' deep acting is (a) negatively



**Table 3** Correlation Coefficients for All Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	30.61	6.51									
2. Gender	0.50	0.50	0.02								
3. Education	3.82	0.69	-0.17**	0.01							
4. Surface acting	2.77	1.28	-0.03	0.01	-0.01	(0.86)					
5. Deep acting	5.05	1.17	-0.06	0.00	0.13*	-0.45**	(0.78)				
6. Perceived face threat	2.40	1.09	0.09	0.06	-0.19**	0.45**	-0.39**	(0.81)			
7. Customer misbehavior	2.39	0.69	-0.05	-0.01	-0.03	0.30**	-0.13*	0.27**	(0.80)		
8. Repurchase intention	4.84	1.13	-0.02	0.04	0.02	-0.34**	0.26**	-0.37**	-0.34**	(0.79)	
9. Face threat sensitivity	2.86	1.30	-0.03	-0.02	0.01	0.28**	-0.11	0.27**	0.03	-0.09	(0.82)

Notes: N = 252; \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01. Reliabilities provided on the diagonal.

Abbreviation: SD, standard deviation.

**Table 4** Path Analysis Results

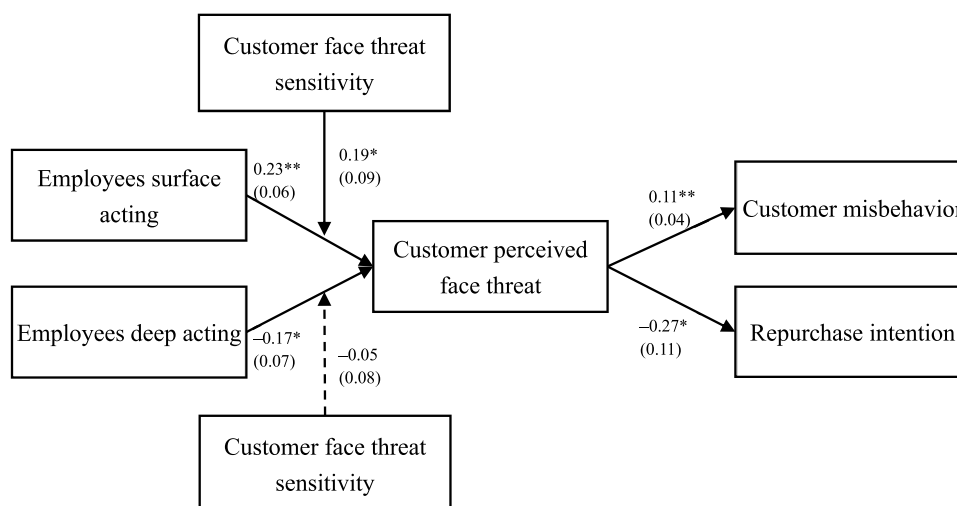
Predictor	Perceived Face Threat		Customer Misbehavior		Repurchase Intention	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Gender	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
Age	0.05	0.12	-0.02	0.08	0.13	0.13
Education	-0.24**	0.09	-0.01	0.08	-0.07	0.13
Surface acting (SA)	0.23**	0.06	0.13**	0.04	-0.17*	0.07
Deep acting (DA)	-0.17*	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.08	0.06
Face threat sensitivity (FTS)	0.15**	0.05				
SA FTS*	0.19*	0.09				
DA FTS*	-0.05	0.08				
Perceived face threat			0.11**	0.04	-0.27*	0.11
R <sup>2</sup>	0.35**		0.12*		0.19**	

Note: \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01.

related to customer misbehavior and (b) positively related to repurchase intention. We controlled the demographics, and the results showed that employees' surface acting was positively predicted customer misbehavior ( $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and negatively predicted repurchase intention ( $b = -0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), providing support for Hypothesis 1. However, the results showed that employees' deep acting was not significantly related to customer misbehavior ( $b = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , n.s.) and repurchase intention ( $b = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , n.s.); thus, Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

Hypothesis 3 proposes that customer-perceived face threat mediates the relationship between surface acting and (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention. And Hypothesis 4 proposes that customer perceived face threat mediates the relationship between deep acting and (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention. We used path analysis with the bootstrap method to infer the indirect effects of service employee' emotional labor on customer misbehavior and repurchase intention through perceived face threat. As shown in Table 5, the indirect effects of employees' surface acting on customer misbehavior (estimate = 0.03, 95% CI = [0.008, 0.056]) and repurchase intention (estimate = -0.06, 95% CI = [-0.130, -0.021]) through perceived face threat were significant. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported. And the indirect effects of employees' deep acting on customer misbehavior (estimate = -0.02, 95% CI = [-0.044, -0.004]) and repurchase intention (estimate = 0.05, 95% CI = [0.005, 0.126]) through perceived face threat were significant. Thus, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Hypothesis 5 proposes that customer face threat sensitivity plays a moderating role between employees' surface acting and customer perceived face threat. And Hypothesis 6 proposes that customer face threat sensitivity plays



**Figure 2** Path analysis results.

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

a moderating role between employees' deep acting and customer perceived face threat. As shown in Table 4, the interaction (surface acting \* face threat sensitivity) was positively predicted perceived face threat ( $b = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), while the interaction (deep acting \* face threat sensitivity) was not significantly related to perceived face threat ( $b = -0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , n.s.). Thus, Hypothesis 5 is preliminarily supported, while Hypothesis 6 was not supported.

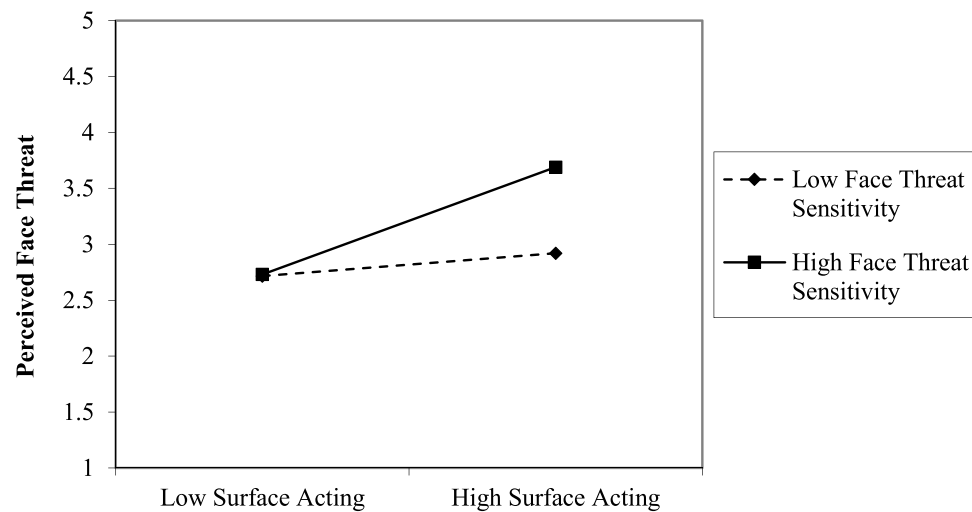
We plotted this moderation effect at conditional values of customer face threat sensitivity ( $\pm 1$  SD) in Figure 3. The simple slopes in Figure 3 revealed that the relationship between surface acting and perceived face threat was significant amongst customers whose level of face threat sensitivity was high ( $\beta = 0.48$ ,  $t = 6.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) but not significant amongst customers whose level of face threat sensitivity was low ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $t = 1.02$ ,  $p = 0.309$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 5 is supported.

Hypothesis 7 proposes customer face threat sensitivity moderated the indirect effect of employees' surface acting on (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention via perceived face threat. And Hypothesis 8 proposes customer face threat sensitivity moderated the indirect effect of employees' deep acting on (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention via perceived face threat. Table 5 shows that the indirect effect of employees' surface acting on customer misbehavior via

**Table 5** Indirect Effects Based on 5000 Bootstrapping Replications

Path	Indirect Effect	SE	95% CI
<b>Mediation effects</b>			
SA $\rightarrow$ PFT $\rightarrow$ CMB	0.03	0.01	[0.008, 0.056]
SA $\rightarrow$ PFT $\rightarrow$ RPI	-0.06	0.03	[-0.130, -0.021]
DA $\rightarrow$ PFT $\rightarrow$ CMB	-0.02	0.01	[-0.044, -0.004]
DA $\rightarrow$ PFT $\rightarrow$ RPI	0.05	0.03	[0.005, 0.126]
<b>Moderated mediation effects</b>			
SA $\rightarrow$ PFT $\rightarrow$ CMB			
High FTS (+ 1 SD)	0.05	0.02	[0.020, 0.105]
Low FTS (- 1 SD)	-0.002	0.02	[-0.036, 0.034]
Differences (high - low)	0.06	0.03	[0.009, 0.132]
SA $\rightarrow$ PFT $\rightarrow$ RPI			
High FTS (+ 1 SD)	-0.13	0.06	[-0.279, -0.030]
Low FTS (- 1 SD)	0.01	0.05	[-0.063, 0.121]
Differences (high - low)	-0.14	0.10	[-0.399, -0.009]

**Abbreviations:** SA, surface acting; DA, deep acting; PFT, perceived face threat; CMB, customer misbehavior; RPI, repurchase intention; FTS, face threat sensitivity.



**Figure 3** The interaction of surface acting and face threat sensitivity on perceived face threat.

perceived face threat was significant among customers whose level of face threat sensitivity was high (estimate = 0.05, 95% CI = [0.020, 0.105]) but not significant among customers whose level of face threat sensitivity was low (estimate = -0.002, 95% CI = [-0.036, 0.034]), and the difference between two indirect effects was significant (difference = 0.06, 95% CI = [0.009, 0.132]). In addition, the indirect effect of employees' surface acting on repurchase intention via perceived face threat was significant among customers whose level of face threat sensitivity was high (estimate = -0.13, 95% CI = [-0.279, -0.030]) but not significant among customers whose level of face threat sensitivity was low (estimate = 0.01, 95% CI = [-0.063, 0.121]), and the difference between two indirect effects was significant (difference = -0.14, 95% CI = [-0.399, -0.009]). Thus, Hypothesis 7 is supported. Since Hypothesis 6 was not supported, naturally Hypothesis 8 is not supported either. We summarized the results of hypotheses testing, as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6** Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypothesis	Content	Supported or Not
Hypothesis 1	Employees' surface acting is (a) positively related to customer misbehavior and (b) negatively related to repurchase intention	Supported
Hypothesis 2	Employees' deep acting is (a) negatively related to customer misbehavior and (b) positively related to repurchase intention	Not supported
Hypothesis 3	Customer-perceived face threat mediates the relationship between surface acting and (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention	Supported
Hypothesis 4	Customer-perceived face threat mediates the relationship between deep acting and (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention	Supported
Hypothesis 5	Customer face threat sensitivity play a moderating role between employees' surface acting and customer perceived face threat	Supported
Hypothesis 6	Customer face threat sensitivity play a moderating role between employees' deep acting and customer perceived face threat	Not supported
Hypothesis 7	Customer face threat sensitivity moderated the indirect effect of employees' surface acting on (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention via perceived face threat	Supported
Hypothesis 8	Customer face threat sensitivity moderated the indirect effect of employees' deep acting on (a) customer misbehavior and (b) repurchase intention via perceived face threat	Not supported

## Discussion

Based on a Chinese sample, this study explores the different effects of surface acting and deep acting on customer misbehavior and repurchase intention and explores the mediating role of customer-perceived face threat in the above relationship based on face theory and also verifies the moderating role of customer face threat sensitivity in the relationship between surface acting and customer-perceived face threat. Our study found that during the service process, employees' surface acting increased customer perceptions of face threat, thereby increasing customer misbehavior and decreasing their repurchase intention, while deep acting decreased customer perceptions of face threat, thereby decreasing customer misbehavior and increasing their repurchase intention. Further, customer face threat sensitivity moderates the relationship between employee surface acting and customer face threat perception, ie, the stronger the positive relationship between employee surface acting and customer face threat perception when customer face threat sensitivity is high rather than low. And customer face threat sensitivity moderates the indirect effect of employees' surface acting on customer misbehavior and repurchase intention through customer face threat perception.

By comparing this study with previous studies on emotional labor, we found that the negative consequences of surface acting and the positive effects of deep acting are basically consistent with previous studies. For example, Wang<sup>8</sup> have found that surface acting reduces customer loyalty, while deep acting increases it. Also, Hur et al<sup>10</sup> have found that surface acting reduces customer satisfaction, while deep acting increases it. However, unlike previous studies, this study focuses on two important outcome variables, customer misbehavior and repurchase intention. In addition, based on the face theory, we investigate the mediating effect of face threat and the moderating effect of face threat sensitivity between emotional labor and customer misbehavior and repurchase intention.

It is worth noting that our results found that the effect of deep acting on customer misbehavior and repurchase intention was not significant, perhaps because customers' attention to surface acting was stronger than that of deep acting. According to the division of Gardner et al,<sup>56</sup> only service employees sincerely express their feelings can they thoroughly play a positive role. In addition, the moderating effect of face threat sensitivity on deep acting and perceived face threat was not significant. According to the face theory, for individuals with higher face threat sensitivity, individuals will be more sensitive to negative events that make them lose face, such as surface acting. They were less responsive to positive events that did not cause them to lose face, such as deep acting. This may be the reason why face threat sensitivity did not moderate the relationship between deep acting and perceived face threat.

## Theoretical Implications

First, our study enriches and extends existing research on the consequences of emotional labor by revealing the differential effects of different emotional labor of service employees on customer misbehavior and repurchase intentions. Existing research on the consequences of emotional labor focuses on its impact on service employees themselves and the organization, but less on the impact on customers.<sup>6</sup> During the service process, the emotional labor of service employees directly affects the service experience of customers, which in turn has an impact on customer misbehavior and repurchase intentions. At the same time, existing research on the antecedents of customer misbehavior is mainly based on customers' own (eg, personality traits)<sup>57</sup> or other customer perspectives.<sup>58–60</sup> This study, based on employees' perspective, identifies different effects by which two different emotional labor of employees on customer misbehavior during the service interaction.

Second, based on face theory, this study constructs and examines the mediating mechanism of customer face threat perception in the process of employee emotional labor influencing customer misbehavior and repurchase intention, thus contributing a new mechanism of customer face threat to the research related to employee–customer interaction. While most existing studies on the effects of employee emotional labor have focused on conservation of resources theory and affective event theory,<sup>6</sup> this study explores the role of customer face threat during service interactions based on face theory. This study is another research result that re-understanding the effect of emotional labor on service employees from a face perspective and enriches the theoretical framework of emotional labor.

Third, this study examined the moderating role of customer face threat sensitivity in the relationship between employee emotional labor and customer face threat perception. Previous studies on the effects of emotional labor have mainly examined the moderating role of service climate (eg, climate of authenticity), job position and employee gender<sup>6</sup> but have neglected customer-related factors. Based on the face theory, this study explores the boundary conditions between employee emotional labor and customer face threat perception, customer misbehavior and repurchase intention in the service process, enriching the boundary condition of the effect of emotional labor.

## Practical Implications

First and foremost, service-oriented companies should focus on managing and directing the emotional labor of their employees. According to the study's findings, emotional labor performed by employees may influence customers' misbehavior and likelihood to make repeat purchases. As a result, it is important to manage employees' internal and external emotional expressions in order to give customers sincere service. This is done by controlling employees' emotional labor and encouraging them to employ deep acting. By reducing the likelihood of customer misbehavior from the employees' point of view, the organization will be able to increase service performance and foster positive customer connections, which will ultimately result in improved benefits for the service company.

Second, service companies should prioritize staff training and skill development. In order for employees to serve customers honestly and in compliance with the organization's emotional display rules, companies should give them additional training on how to convey their emotions. This would lessen the threat to customers' faces. In order to assist employees be more at ease and sincere with consumers, organizations should speak with and teach more employees who frequently engage in surface acting or who do not express themselves in a way that complies with the requirements for emotional display.

Third, companies that focus on providing a high degree of customer service should be aware of their customers' psychological needs. Companies must understand the psychological activities and face-state of their customers during the service process in order to develop positive relationships with them. They must also pay attention to the customer's feeling of value and the emotional experiences they had while receiving the service. Customers will feel respected and valued as a result, which will lower the amount of face threat, prevent customer misbehavior and the lowering of repurchase intention brought on by face threat and, in the end, benefit the companies' overall service quality and efficiency.

## Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study also has certain limitations. First, the issue of causality. The data in this study were collected at the same time period, and despite the use of customer-employee pairings for the data collection, it was not possible to determine the exact causal relationship between employee emotional labor (surface acting and deep acting) and customer misbehavior. Therefore, in order to further clarify the causal relationship between variables, future research can be investigated through a multi-stage follow-up survey supplemented by experimental methods.

Second, the issue of common method bias. Most variables in this study were reported by customers, and considering the possible common method bias, which may cause some errors in the study results. In the future, data can be collected by means of exchange evaluation, so as to reduce the bias of common methods and ensure the accuracy of research results.

Third, this study only considers the mediating effect of customer face threat perception and the moderating effect of customer face threat sensitivity. Future research can further enrich the research on the effect of emotional labor based on different theoretical perspectives. For example, future research can try to consider the mediating role of customers' affective commitment from the affective perspective. Also, it would be interesting to consider the service scenario, namely, whether surface acting has a stronger negative effect on customer face threat perception when other customers are present?

Finally, when collecting the data, we did not take into account the difference between peak and off-peak dining of the participants, which may affect the customers' response to the emotional labor of the service employees. There may be a case for customers to be more tolerant of the surface acting of serving employees at peak times. However, because we

did not collect customers' eating time, we could not compare whether customers' eating at peak and off-peak would have an impact on our research conclusion. Therefore, we encourage future research to explore this direction.

## Conclusion

Based on face theory, this study explores the impact of emotional labor on customer misbehavior and repurchase intention. We collected a total of 252 pairs of employee–customer valid matching data. And the results showed that surface acting increases customer misbehavior and reduces repurchase intention by increasing customer face threat perception, while deep acting reduces customer misbehavior and increases repurchase intention by reducing customer face threat perception. Especially for customers with high face threat sensitivity, surface acting has more negative effects on customer misbehavior and repurchase intention. We provide practical implications for service enterprises to reduce and eliminate customer misbehavior and increase repurchase intention by paying attention to employees' emotional labor. Specifically, service enterprises need to focus on the management of employees' internal and external emotional expressions, which requires providing sincere service to customers by regulating employees' emotional labor and guiding them to use deep acting strategies.

## Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki were followed.

## Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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