



When Surface Acting Leads to Burnout: Can Leader–Member Exchange Buffer These Effects?

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Abstract

This current research examines the relationship between employees' surface acting and emotional labor on burnout, specifically emotional exhaustion and cynicism, and investigates the moderating role of leader–member exchange (LMX). Drawing on Social Exchange theory (SET) and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, the research proposes that surface acting increases employees' emotional exhaustion and cynicism; in turn, high-quality LMX may help mitigate these effects. Data were collected from 171 employees (who completed all four waves) in Thailand using a four-stage survey design, resulting in 684 observations across time points. A longitudinal study design is employed in this research. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess measurement validity, and hypotheses were tested using regression analysis with the PROCESS macro. The results indicated that surface acting has a significant positive effect on both emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Furthermore, LMX significantly moderates these relationships, although the effects differ across burnout outcomes. Specifically, the interaction between surface acting and LMX strengthens the relationship with emotional exhaustion, contradicting the predicted buffering effect. In contrast, LMX weakens the relationship between surface acting and cynicism. These findings contribute to the literature on emotional labor and leadership by highlighting the complex role of relational resources in shaping employee burnout outcomes. Practical implications for leadership and the management of emotional labor are discussed.

Keywords: Surface Acting, Emotional Exhaustion, Cynicism, Leader–Member Exchange, Burnout

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), burnout was included in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) in 2019, defined as a syndrome resulting from continuing workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. Reflecting its growth, the State of the Global Workplace (2024) reported that 48% of employees worldwide report experiencing burnout at work, indicating that nearly



half of the workforce faces levels of exhaustion that affect engagement, motivation, and performance. This widespread prevalence highlights systemic organizational challenges related to workload, leadership practices, and workplace culture, emphasizing the need for strategic attention from organizations. Recently, the Burnout Report (2026) by Mental Health UK further indicates that 91% of workers experience high levels of stress and pressure, particularly Gen Z employees, who have considered taking leave due to mental health concerns, with some even contemplating resignation for this reason. Hence, burnout not only affects individual well-being but also has significant organizational consequences, including absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, lower performance, and higher turnover intention (Giorgi et al., 2017; Han et al., 2016). Moreover, burnout syndrome leads to important psychological and behavioral consequences from a progressive response to long-lasting work-related stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Likewise, it affects employees' cognitive, emotional, and attitudinal functioning, often resulting in negative behaviors toward work, colleagues, and clients (Ovchinnikov et al., 2015).

One important factor contributing to burnout is emotional labor, particularly surface acting. Surface acting occurs when employees modify their outward emotional expressions without changing their internal feelings to meet organizational display rules (Grandey, 2000). Within Thailand's organizational culture, which is characterized by hierarchy, respect for authority, and an emphasis on group harmony, employees' engagement in emotional labor is shaped. Surface acting is often employed to maintain workplace relationships, underscoring the importance of examining these dynamics within the Thai context. This inconsistency between felt and presented emotions creates emotional dissonance and consumes psychological resources, which may eventually lead to burnout outcomes such as emotional exhaustion (Maslach, 1986; Maslach et al., 2001). Accordingly, this research focuses on emotional exhaustion and cynicism, which represent the core strain and attitudinal emotional labor on burnout. Prior researches (Ahmad, 2025; Bono & Vey, 2005; Lim et al., 2025) found that surface acting is positively related to emotional exhaustion, including in leader-directed interactions, where employees fake positive emotions (Hu & Shi, 2015). In addition, surface acting is further positively related to cynicism (Peng et al., 2021) reflecting negative attitudes toward work and the organization (Dean Jr et al., 1998; Maslach et al., 2001). However, employees' responses to burnout outcomes may depend on relational resources within the workplace.

Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET), social interactions are regarded as exchanges of resources that create mutual obligations and shape relationships between individuals, groups, or organizations (Cook et al., 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In organizational contexts, this perspective was applied to examine supervisor-subordinate relationships and their influence on employee outcomes (Liden et al., 1997). These



relational dynamics are conceptualized through the leader–member exchange (LMX) theory, which emphasizes the role of relationship quality and emotions in shaping workplace interactions (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015). Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, strong LMX helps employees adapt to new work modes and reduces exhaustion as well as turnover intentions (Petrilli et al., 2024). High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by trust, support, and open communication, which provide employees with psychological resources that reduce the negative effects of emotional labor (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Xu et al., 2015) and enhance employee satisfaction and commitment (Willie, 2025). However, limited research has examined whether LMX might reduce the negative effects of surface acting on emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

Therefore, this research aims to examine the moderating role of leader–member exchange (LMX) in the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion and cynicism, to provide insights into how LMX may mitigate the negative effects of emotional labor on burnout.

Objectives

1. Examine the effect of surface acting on employees' emotional exhaustion and cynicism.
2. Investigate whether leader–member exchange moderates the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion.
3. Investigate whether leader–member exchange moderates the relationship between surface acting and cynicism.

Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory (SET) describes workplace relationships as reciprocal interactions in which individuals exchange resources and develop mutual obligations (Cook et al., 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Individuals engage in relationships based on the expectation of beneficial outcomes, and their behaviors are shaped by the quality of these exchanges. In organizational contexts, SET provides the theoretical foundation for Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), which describes the relationship between leaders and subordinates characterized by trust, support, and reciprocal obligations (Blau, 2017; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Liden et al., 1997). Accordingly, SET offers a useful background for understanding how leader–member relationships may shape employees' emotional labor behaviors, such as surface acting, through reciprocal workplace interactions.

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Grounded in Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, leadership effectiveness is understood through the quality of the relationships between leaders and their



subordinates (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). The theory suggested that leaders do not interact with all employees in the same way, but instead develop relationships of varying quality with different members (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Accordingly, high-quality LMX relationships are defined by open communication, mutual respect, trust, and support, whereas low-quality relationships tend to involve more formal and limited interactions (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). As per Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) and Liden and Maslyn (1998) LMX distinguishes between in-group members, who maintain stronger, more supportive exchanges with leaders, and out-group members, who experience more transactional relationships. Consistent with social exchange principles, high-quality LMX relationships involve reciprocal exchanges in which leaders provide support and resources, and employees reciprocate with loyalty and constructive work behaviors. As a result, strong LMX relationships are associated with positive outcomes such as higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and improved performance (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Surface Acting

Emotional labor refers to the process by which employees regulate their emotions to comply with organizational display rules during interpersonal interactions (Diefendorff et al., 2011; Morris & Feldman, 1996). This process involves managing emotional expressions to meet role expectations and organizational requirements (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Surface acting is a specific form of emotional labor in which employees modify their outward emotional expressions without changing their internal feelings (Hochschild, 1983). In this process, individuals suppress genuine emotions or display emotions they do not truly feel to conform to expected workplace norms. Such emotional regulation frequently occurs in workplace interactions, including communication with supervisors and colleagues (Grandey et al., 2007). As surface acting involves concealing authentic emotions and presenting inauthentic displays, it may lead to emotional strain and negative psychological outcomes for employees (Erickson & Ritter, 2001).

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion refers to the feeling of being emotionally drained and depleted of emotional resources due to prolonged work-related stress (Maslach, 1986; Maslach et al., 2001). It is characterized by exhaustion, reduced energy, and a diminished capacity to cope with emotional job stresses. As a component of burnout, emotional exhaustion reflects the psychological strain caused by continuous exposure to workplace stressors (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Employees experiencing emotional exhaustion often struggle to regulate their emotions and maintain engagement in work tasks (Maslach et al., 2001). Beyond the workplace, emotional exhaustion can negatively affect individuals'



overall well-being, contributing to decreased job satisfaction, mental strain, and potential health problems over time (Maslach, 1986; Maslach et al., 2001).

Cynicism

Cynicism is a component of burnout, described as a synonym of depersonalization (Pranjic & Bilić, 2014), and refers to a negative or detached attitude toward one's work, colleagues, or organization (Dean Jr et al., 1998; Maslach et al., 2001). It is characterized by skepticism, disengagement, and reduced commitment to work. Moreover, it often develops as a response to prolonged work-related stressors such as excessive job demands, lack of recognition, or perceived unfairness in the workplace (Maslach et al., 2001; Viljoen & Claassen, 2017). Over time, this state reflects growing disillusionment and emotional distancing from work. As a result, cynicism can negatively affect employee morale, job satisfaction, and overall organizational functioning.

Surface Acting as Antecedents of Burnout

Surface acting refers to the discrepancy between felt and expressed emotions, which creates emotional dissonance, requiring continuous self-monitoring and emotional regulation (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). Such regulation consumes substantial cognitive and emotional resources and may lead to psychological burnout over time. Emotional exhaustion reflects the depletion of emotional resources caused by prolonged emotional regulation and work-related stress (Maslach et al., 2001). The constant suppression or fabrication of emotions during surface acting can increase emotional fatigue and reduce employees' capacity to cope with job demands (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Prior research (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011) found that surface acting and burnout correlate as employees display desired emotions by planning and controlling, regardless of their true feelings. Several studies examined a positive relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion across various industry contexts (Ozcelik, 2013; Tiwari et al., 2020). For instance, in the airline industry, flight attendants were increasingly required to display emotions that do not reflect their true feelings, and the impact of emotional exhaustion on resignation becomes more intense (Ahmad, 2025). Similarly, Lim et al. (2025) suggested that school counselors are often required to display socially appropriate emotions while concealing genuine feelings, which can increase emotional exhaustion. Lavelle et al. (2021) further examined surface acting as a mediating mechanism, discovering that it is related to job-related emotional demands and employee strain, eventually leading to emotional exhaustion.

In addition to emotional exhaustion, surface acting further contributes to cynicism, characterized by a detached and negative attitude toward work (Maslach et al., 2001). Persistent emotional dissonance and feelings of inauthenticity may cause employees to distance themselves psychologically from their work as a coping mechanism (Maslach et



al., 2001). According to Brotheridge and Lee (2002), surface acting led to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, which may increase organizational cynicism as employees perceive that the organization fails to meet their needs (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Likewise, prior research (Peng et al., 2021) supported that higher levels of surface acting and the emotional strategies employees use at work can contribute to increased organizational cynicism.

Therefore, this surface acting is likely to foster employees' emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Surface acting is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

H2: Surface acting is positively related to cynicism.

Moderating Role of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) in the Relationship between Employees' Surface Acting and Burnout Outcomes.

Surface acting often consumes psychological resources and impacts emotional labor on burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Emotional exhaustion reflects feelings of exhaustion and depletion resulting from sustained emotional demands, whereas cynicism represents a detached or negative attitude toward one's work and organization (Tharani et al., 2023; Toscanelli et al., 2024). When employees frequently engage in surface acting, the discrepancy between felt and expressed emotions may intensify emotional strain (Yang & Jang, 2022), thereby increasing emotional exhaustion and fostering cynical attitudes. Several prior studies explored factors that mitigate these effects. For instance, research by Lim et al. (2025) revealed that higher levels of administrative support moderate the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion, thereby reducing emotional strain. Nevertheless, empirical research examining whether the relationship between supervisor and subordinate can mitigate the adverse effects of surface acting on emotional exhaustion and cynicism remains limited.

This research draws on the Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which refers to the leader–member relationship (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Liden & Maslyn, 1998) and is further related to emotional labor and burnout, thereby mitigating negative work experiences (Lee & Ji, 2018). High-quality LMX relationships provide employees with support, trust, and open communication, which can help them cope with emotional demands. In contrast, employees with low-quality LMX may experience an increased level of tension as a result of inadequate information or inadequate support (Jensen et al., 1997; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Xu et al., 2015). Past research results LMX in the relationship between surface acting and cynicism, as research by Scott and Zweig (2020) indicated that high levels of organizational cynicism or distrust toward the organization can hinder the development of high-quality LMX. Similarly, previous research (Sayidina & Fitriastuti, 2025) found that high levels of cynicism reduce employees' willingness to engage positively with



their organization, thereby leading to lower organizational citizenship behaviors. Nonetheless, observed research examining the moderating role of LMX in buffering the effects of surface acting on emotional exhaustion and cynicism remains restricted.

Therefore, high-quality LMX may alleviate emotional strain and reduce the likelihood that surface acting leads to exhaustion and cynicism, whereas low-quality LMX may leave employees more vulnerable to its negative consequences. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: LMX moderates the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion, such that the relationship is weaker when LMX quality is high.

H3b: LMX moderates the relationship between surface acting and cynicism, such that the positive relationship is weaker when LMX quality is high.

Materials and Methods

The research employed a longitudinal study design to examine the measurement. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS to assess construct validity, reliability, and overall model fit (Hair et al., 2013). Hypotheses were tested using the SPSS PROCESS Macro (Model 1) with regression-based analysis to examine moderation effects. Bootstrapping procedures were applied to estimate standard errors and construct confidence intervals, providing more robust estimates with fewer parametric assumptions and reducing the likelihood of Type I error (Hair et al., 2013; Hayes & Rockwood, 2020).

Research Framework

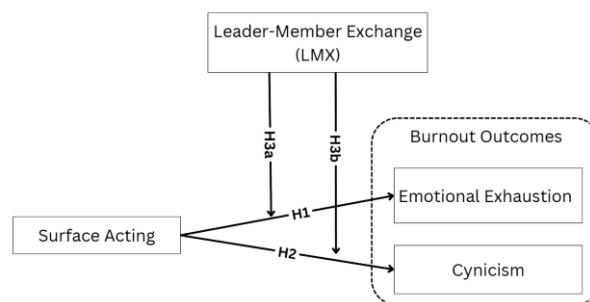


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Design, Sample, and Data Collection

The survey began with a statement explaining the research's purpose and assuring participants that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for research purposes. Data were collected from employees in Thailand using a four-stage survey design. The first survey was distributed through networks of employees from various industries, who further shared it within their organizations, including information and measured perceptions of leader-member exchange (LMX). LMX was measured only at



Time 1, as it represents a relatively stable relational quality between an employee and their supervisor (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). While surface acting, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism were measured across all four time points. Subsequent surveys (Times 2–4) were distributed via email using addresses provided by respondents, with a two-step email confirmation process to reduce typographical errors. The data collection process was conducted from October to January, with surveys distributed every Friday to capture weekly variations in emotionally related variables. Of the 200 employees initially invited, only 171 completed all four waves, resulting in a response rate of 85.5% and 684 observations across time points, which enabled the examination of within-person changes in surface acting and burnout over the study period.

Variable Measurement

Surface acting, reflecting employees' regulation of emotional displays during work interactions, was measured with four items adapted from Brotheridge and Lee (2003) using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Emotional exhaustion, reflecting emotional fatigue and resource depletion, and Cynicism, reflecting a detached or negative attitude toward work, were each assessed with five items using the Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Survey (MBI-GS) on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Leader–member exchange (LMX), reflecting the quality of the relationship between employees and their supervisors, was measured using a seven-item scale from Janssen and Van Yperen (2004) with a seven-point Likert scale.

Results

Descriptive Analysis and Sample Characteristics

After screening for incomplete responses, the final dataset consisted of 171 respondents (684 observations across four time points). The sample was predominantly female (73.1%), with 26.9% male respondents. Most participants were 25–31 years old (40.4%) and 32–38 years old (39.2%), indicating a concentration in the early to mid-career stage. Regarding work experience, the largest group reported 5–10 years (35.1%), followed by 3–5 years (19.3%) and 10–15 years (17%), suggesting moderate to substantial professional experience. For tenure with their current supervisor, most respondents reported 3–5 years (34.5%) or 1–3 years (21.1%). In terms of supervisor characteristics, 56.1% were female, and the majority were above 45 years old (55.6%). Finally, organizational tenure was most commonly 11–15 years (26.3%), followed by 1–5 years (22.2%) and 6–10 years (20.5%). Overall, the sample largely consisted of mid-career employees with considerable work and supervisory experience.



Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

The results of this measurement model indicated that the data provided a good fit for the model, $\chi^2 = 424.373$ (DF = 145), GFI = 0.983, NFI = 0.989, IFI = 0.993, CFI = 0.993, RMSEA = 0.029, RMR = 0.053, and p-value < 0.001. A reasonable goodness-of-fit of the data was demonstrated by our model, as the fitness indices for the measurement model satisfied acceptable standards (Hair et al., 2013).

Validity and Reliability

The results in Table 1 showed that all factor loadings exceeded 0.7, Composite reliability (CR) values were above 0.7, average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.5 for all constructs, and Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded the 0.6 threshold. Indicating strong convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Correlation Matrix

The results indicate that surface acting is positively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.48$, $p < .001$) and cynicism ($r = 0.48$, $p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of surface acting are associated with increased burnout outcomes. Surface acting also showed a significant negative correlation with LMX ($r = -0.41$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, emotional exhaustion is strongly and positively related to cynicism ($r = 0.66$, $p < .001$) and negatively associated with LMX ($r = -0.78$, $p < .001$). Similarly, cynicism demonstrated a significant negative correlation with LMX ($r = -0.58$, $p < .001$). Overall, the findings revealed significant positive relationships among burnout outcome variables and negative associations with LMX.

Table 1: Results of Validity and Reliability

Variables	CR	AVE	MSV	Cronbach's Alpha
Surface Acting	0.85	0.59	0.34	0.86
Emotional Exhaustion	0.89	0.62	0.73	0.90
Cynicism	0.83	0.50	0.63	0.85
LMX	0.96	0.79	0.73	0.96

Hypothesis Testing Results

Regression analyses using the PROCESS macro were conducted to examine the direct and moderate effects among the study variables. The results in Table 2 indicated that surface acting has a significant positive effect on emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.10$, $t = 2.05$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.19]), supporting H1. Similarly, surface acting shows a significant positive relationship with cynicism ($\beta = 0.50$, $t = 9.07$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.39, 0.60]), supporting H2. These findings suggested that higher levels of surface acting are associated



with increased burnout outcomes. Regarding the moderating role of leader–member exchange (LMX), the interaction between surface acting and LMX significantly predicts emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.04$, $t = 3.90$, $p < .001$), indicating a moderating effect. However, the positive interaction coefficient suggested that the relationship becomes stronger when LMX is high, which is inconsistent with the prediction of H3a. Therefore, H3a is not supported. Furthermore, the interaction between surface acting and LMX is significant for cynicism ($\beta = -0.03$, $t = -2.64$, $p < .01$). The negative coefficient indicated that high LMX weakens the positive relationship between surface acting and cynicism, supporting H3b. The model accounts for 65% of the variance in emotional exhaustion ($R^2 = 0.65$, $F = 1405.77$, $p < .001$) and 40% of the variance in cynicism ($R^2 = 0.40$, $F = 522.04$, $p < .001$), with both models being statistically significant.

Table 2: Hypothesis Testing Results (Bootstrapping Analysis)

Path Analysis	β	SE	t	p	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Surface Acting →						
Emotional Exhaustion	0.10	0.05	2.05	< .05	0.00	0.19
Surface Acting → Cynicism	0.50	0.05	9.07	< .001	0.39	0.60
Surface Acting × LMX →						
Emotional Exhaustion	0.04	0.01	3.90	< .001	0.02	0.06
Surface Acting × LMX →						
Cynicism	-0.03	0.01	-2.64	< .01	-0.06	-0.01

The moderation effects were analyzed in Table 3, which indicated that surface acting is positively associated with emotional exhaustion across all levels of LMX. The relationship remains significant at low, mean, and high LMX, suggesting that engaging in surface acting consistently increases emotional exhaustion regardless of the quality of leader–member relationships. For cynicism, the result shows in Table 4 that surface acting also has a significant positive relationship at all LMX levels. However, the effect becomes weaker as LMX increases, indicating that higher-quality leader–member exchange may partially buffer the impact of surface acting on employees’ cynical attitudes toward work.

Table 3: Result of the Moderation Effect of Surface Acting on Emotional Exhaustion at Different Levels of LMX

LMX	Effect	SE	t	p	95% CI
Low (2.64)	0.21	0.02	8.27	< .001	[0.16, 0.25]
Mean (4.26)	0.27	0.02	14.15	< .001	[0.23, 0.31]
High (5.88)	0.34	0.03	12.78	< .001	[0.29, 0.39]



Table 4: Result of the Moderation Effect of Surface Acting on Cynicism at Different Levels of LMX

	LMX	Effect	SE	t	p	95% CI
	Low (2.64)	0.41	0.03	14.41	< .001	[0.36, 0.47]
	Mean (4.26)	0.36	0.02	16.29	< .001	[0.32, 0.40]
	High (5.88)	0.31	0.03	10.12	< .001	[0.25, 0.37]

Overall, the findings indicated that surface acting significantly increases emotional exhaustion and cynicism, supporting H1 and H2. LMX significantly moderates both relationships. However, the interaction strengthens the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion, contradicting H3a. In contrast, LMX weakens the relationship between surface acting and cynicism, supporting H3b.

Conclusions and Discussion

This research examined the effects of employees' surface acting on burnout outcomes, specifically emotional exhaustion and cynicism, and investigated the moderating role of leader-member exchange (LMX). The findings indicated that surface acting significantly increases both emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Ozcelik, 2013; Tiwari et al., 2020), supporting H1 and H2. These results are consistent with prior emotional labor research contexts, which suggested that suppressing genuine emotions and displaying inauthentic emotional expressions create emotional dissonance and psychological strain. Over time, such regulation depletes employees' emotional resources and contributes to burnout. Therefore, employees who frequently engage in surface acting are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and develop negative attitudes toward their work.

Regarding the moderating role of LMX, the results revealed mixed findings. The interaction between surface acting and LMX significantly predicts emotional exhaustion; however, the direction of the interaction suggested that the relationship becomes stronger when LMX quality is higher, which contradicts H3a. This finding contradicts prior research suggesting that high-quality leader-member relationships mitigate the impact of emotional labor on employees' emotional exhaustion (Lee & Ji, 2018; Yikilmaz et al., 2024). Explanation is that high-quality leader-member relationships may not always function as a protective resource in emotionally demanding roles. Instead, employees who maintain close and supportive relationships with their supervisors may experience stronger expectations to sustain positive interactions and meet relational obligations. As a result, they may exert greater effort to regulate their emotions and maintain favorable impressions during interactions with leaders. Hypothesis H3b, the results demonstrated



that leader–member relationships weaken the positive relationship between surface acting and cynicism, supporting H3b. This finding suggests that LMX weakens the relationship between surface acting and cynicism but strengthens its effect on emotional exhaustion, despite their high correlation, because emotional exhaustion often fosters negative, detached attitudes (Maslach et al., 2001). High-quality LMX provides support that reduces cynicism but also increases relational obligations, requiring greater effort to maintain interactions and potentially intensifying emotional exhaustion (Grandey, 2000; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Overall, supportive leader–employee relationships offer relational resources such as trust, support, and open communication, enabling employees to cope more effectively with emotional demands and maintain more positive attitudes toward their work and organization.

Theoretical Contributions

The research findings contributed to the literature on emotional labor and burnout by providing empirical evidence that surface acting is a significant predictor of burnout outcomes, including emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Furthermore, the study extends leader–member exchange research by examining the moderating role of leader–member relationships in the relationship between emotional labor and burnout. Moreover, the findings highlighted that relational resources within the workplace can influence how employees respond to emotional demands. Importantly, the results suggested that leader–member relationships do not uniformly buffer all burnout outcomes, as their moderating effects may vary depending on the specific dimension of burnout.

Practical Implications

The findings provide several actionable implications for organizations. First, as surface acting increases both emotional exhaustion and cynicism, organizations should acknowledge the psychological costs of emotional labor and seek to reduce excessive emotional display demands wherever possible. Practical strategies include rotating employees through high-demand interpersonal roles, implementing flexible emotional display guidelines, and providing training in emotional regulation, emotional intelligence, and stress management to enhance employees' coping capacity. Additional measures may include scheduled break times that allow employees to temporarily step away from customer interactions and revising customer service scripts to minimize the requirement for continuous emotional display. Second, the results highlight the nuanced role of leadership in managing burnout. Although high-quality leader–member relationships mitigated the association between surface acting and cynicism, they unexpectedly amplified emotional exhaustion (H3a). To address this, organizations may provide LMX-awareness training for supervisors to help them recognize when close relationships



inadvertently increase relational obligations and workload. Human Resources can also implement workload calibration for employees in close leader relationships to prevent overexertion. Cultivating supportive, trust-based relationships while monitoring relational and emotional demands can optimize employee well-being. Finally, given the Thai sample, these recommendations are particularly relevant for industries with high interpersonal demands, such as hospitality, healthcare, and service sectors, where cultural norms emphasize hierarchy, respect for authority, and maintaining group harmony. Addressing both emotional labor demands and leadership quality in these contexts can effectively reduce burnout and promote positive attitudes toward work.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this research has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to employees in Thailand, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or organizational contexts. Future research could examine similar relationships in different countries or industries to enhance external validity. Second, although the study used a multi-wave survey design, the data were self-reported, which may introduce common method bias. Future studies could incorporate multiple data sources or objective measures to strengthen the validity of the findings. Finally, future research may explore additional moderators, such as organizational support, job autonomy, or emotional intelligence, to better understand the conditions under which emotional labor leads to burnout.

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