



Service with a smile? Engagement is a better predictor of job satisfaction than emotional intelligence

Lucy J. Swancott¹ · Sarah K. Davis¹

Accepted: 27 January 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2022

Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) has shown potential for predicting workplace attitudes, including job satisfaction. However, it is unclear how EI works to exert these positive effects (i.e., indirectly through other resources), particularly in those employees who experience high levels of emotional labor through frequent interpersonal interactions. The current study examined the relationship between ability emotional intelligence, emotional labor strategies, work engagement and job satisfaction in 133 hospitality employees (110 females; 22 males). Regression analyses showed that emotional abilities did not significantly predict employees' use of emotional labor strategy, job engagement or satisfaction. However, work engagement significantly predicted job satisfaction through dedication and vigor. EI did not indirectly predict job satisfaction through work engagement or emotional labor strategies. Contrary to existing research, this study suggests the utility of EI in predicting work-related outcomes may be limited for those working in the hospitality industry. Findings highlight the necessity for dynamic, applied measurement, and for hospitality organizations to focus on the development of training interventions which aim to increase engagement.

Keywords emotional intelligence · emotional labor · work engagement · job satisfaction · hospitality

Understanding employees' emotions in the workplace is important given links to job performance, work engagement, prosocial and counterproductive behaviors (Tziner et al., 2020) which are closely linked to employee's job satisfaction (Czarnota-Bojarska, 2015). Job satisfaction - a positive emotional state experienced as a result of employees' perceived job experiences (Locke, 1976; Spector, 1997) - can have implications for mental health, turnover intentions and job performance for hospitality employees (Kovacs et al., 2018). Front-of-house hospitality employees experience high emotional demands due to sustained engagement in customer interactions that require positive emotional displays, such as friendliness, even in the face of interpersonal challenge (Lee & Hwang, 2016). These emotional demands result in the use of *emotional labor strategies* which can be adaptive (e.g., deep-acting) or maladaptive (e.g., surface acting) (e.g., Grandey, 2003). A recent review has outlined a conceptual model of emotional labor which suggests differential use

of emotional labor approaches can influence employee job satisfaction, and emotional intelligence may underpin the use of these strategies (Lee & Madera, 2019).

Emotional intelligence (EI) represents how well we perceive, use, understand and manage emotions (e.g., Mayer et al., 2000), and appears useful for predicting job satisfaction in employees across different sectors (Miao et al., 2017). However, there has been little explicit testing of whether job satisfaction can be explained by differences in 'emotionally intelligent' emotion labor strategy use in hospitality employees. Theoretically, those with higher EI should be more adept at regulating their emotions and the emotions of others to maintain optimal outcomes during stressful encounters (Lea et al., 2019). However, current evidence is inconsistent regarding the relationship between emotional labor strategies and job satisfaction (e.g., Lennard et al., 2019) and few studies have examined links with reference to ability (skills) vs. trait (emotion-related personality/self-efficacy) EI. Those that have, report relatively weak effect sizes (Wen et al., 2019), suggesting that emotional skills may exert an indirect effect on job satisfaction through other key performance factors such as *work engagement*. Studies show that workers with

✉ Lucy J. Swancott
l.swancott@worc.ac.uk

¹ School of Psychology, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, UK

higher levels of EI (emotion understanding; management) are more engaged in their work (Akhtar et al., 2015; Thor, 2012), and this explains the relationship between EI and job satisfaction in a pooled sample of a broad range of occupations such as self-employed individuals, builders and administrators (Extremera et al., 2018). However, this indirect relationship is yet to be explored in hospitality employees.

Consequently, evidence linking EI to job satisfaction through emotion labor strategies is inconsistent and largely unexplored in hospitality workers (see Fig. 1 for summary). There is good evidence to suggest that other key work-related variables, such as work engagement, need to be considered to fully explain satisfaction in emotionally

demanding occupations. We seek to examine this through the following hypotheses testing predictions drawn from the findings of allied literature:

H1: Ability EI (emotion management; emotion understanding skills) will be significantly associated with increased use of deep acting and decreased use of surface acting emotional labor strategies

H2: Ability EI (emotion management; emotion understanding skills) will be significantly associated with higher work engagement

H3: Less frequent use of surface acting and more frequent use of deep acting emotional labor strategies will predict levels of job satisfaction

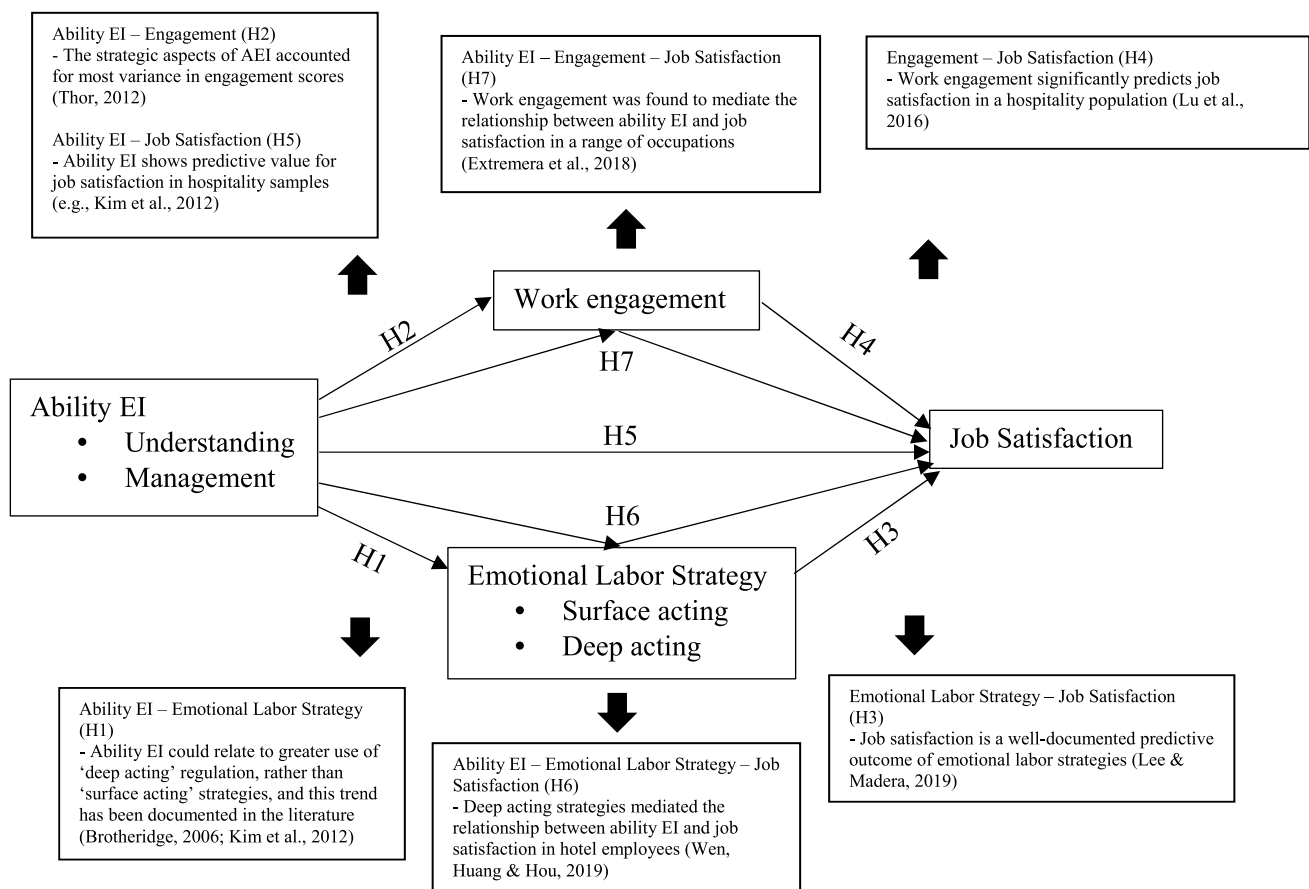


Fig. 1 A conceptualized model showing hypothesized relationships between ability EI, emotional labor strategies, work engagement and job satisfaction in hospitality employees, with a summary of existing literature to support hypothesized pathways. Whilst bivariate links between some variables have been reported (H1-H5), to date, testing of a combined path model (H6, H7) including all variables is missing from the literature. Note: EI = emotional intelligence. H1: Ability EI (emotion management; emotion understanding skills) will be significantly associated with increased use of deep acting and decreased use of surface acting emotional labor strategies. H2: Ability EI (emotion management; emotion understanding skills) will be significantly

associated with higher work engagement. H3: Less frequent use of surface acting and more frequent use of deep acting emotional labor strategies will predict levels of job satisfaction. H4: Work engagement will be positively associated with increased levels of job satisfaction. H5: Ability EI (emotion management; emotion understanding skills) will be associated with higher levels of job satisfaction. H6: Surface acting and deep acting emotional labor strategies will mediate the relationship between ability EI and job satisfaction. H7: Work engagement will mediate the relationship between ability EI and job satisfaction

- H4: Work engagement will be positively associated with increased levels of job satisfaction
- H5: Ability EI (emotion management; emotion understanding skills) will be associated with higher levels of job satisfaction
- H6: Surface acting and deep acting emotional labor strategies will mediate the relationship between ability EI and job satisfaction
- H7: Work engagement will mediate the relationship between ability EI and job satisfaction

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

An opportunity sample of hospitality workers ($N = 133$; 110 females; 22 males) aged 16-60 ($M = 22.38$; $SD = 6.00$) consented to complete an online survey (duration: 20 minutes) approved by the University Ethics Committee.

Measures

Ability Emotional Intelligence was measured using the 19-item Situational Test of Emotional Understanding- Brief (STEU-B) (Allen et al., 2014) and the 18-item Situational Test of Emotion Management- Brief (STEM-B) (Allen et al., 2015). These two elements represent ‘strategic’ emotional skills in the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso model of EI (Mayer et al., 2000) and have been most often implicated in the prediction of occupational performance.

Emotional labor strategies were measured using the 19-item Hospitality Emotional Labor Scale (HELs) (Chu & Murrmann, 2006) which taps emotional dissonance (surface acting, e.g., “I fake a good mood when interacting with customers”) and emotive effort (deep acting e.g., I try to

change my actual feelings to match those that I must express to customers) management strategies.

Work engagement was measured using the 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) which asks respondents to rate the extent they feel work-related energy (vigor), involvement (absorption) and devotion (dedication).

Job satisfaction was measured using the 10-item Generic Job Satisfaction Scale (GJSS) (Macdonald & MacIntyre, 1997), which measures employee’s job satisfaction in relation to job stress, boredom, isolation and danger of illness or injury.

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the study variables. Females had higher levels of emotion management compared to males ($t = -2.72$ $p < .05$). All analyses controlled for sex differences.

Bivariate relationships show that ability EI (emotion understanding and emotion management) does not have a significant relationship with emotional labor strategies (surface acting, deep acting; H1) or work engagement (absorption, dedication, vigor; H2). However, engagement (absorption, dedication, vigor) and surface acting had a significant positive relationship with job satisfaction, whilst deep acting did not (H3 and H4; see Table 1).

To understand the extent to which ability EI (emotional understanding and emotion management), emotional labor strategies (surface-acting and deep-acting) and work engagement collectively predict job satisfaction, a multiple linear regression was conducted. The model was statistically significant ($F(4, 108) = 15.18$, $p < .001$) and accounted for 34% ($Adj. R^2 = .34$) of the variance in job satisfaction scores. Work engagement was the only statistically significant

Table 1 Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. AEI emotion management	-							
2. AEI emotional understanding	.44**	-						
3. Absorption	-.11	-.13	-					
4. Dedication	-.07	-.08	.76**	-				
5. Vigor	-.02	.03	.71**	.66**	-			
6. Surface acting	-.01	-.12	.29*	.37*	.27*	-		
7. Deep acting	.02	.08	.18*	.17*	.17*	-.27*	-	
8. Job satisfaction	-.03	.08	.57**	.32**	.51**	.23*	.12	-
<i>n</i>	129	121	119	119	120	118	119	117
Mean average (<i>SD</i>)	.59(.14)	.59(.14)	4.32(1.08)	4.17(1.24)	4.62(1.01)	3.43(.92)	4.56(.88)	3.26(.73)
Mean total (<i>SD</i>)	10.63(2.55)	11.12(2.75)	25.90(6.51)	20.87(6.22)	27.74(6.08)	37.73(10.09)	36.46(7.06)	32.62(7.32)
Range	0-18	0-19	0-42	0-35	0-42	11-77	8-56	5-50

Table 2 Summary of multiple linear regression analyses. Model 1 predicted job satisfaction scores from scores of emotional intelligence, emotional labor and work engagement (N = 108). Model 2 predicted job satisfaction from scores on the absorption, dedication and vigor facets of work engagement (N = 115).

Variable	B	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Model 1					
Constant	9.67	5.21	1.63	22.89	.02
Sex	-.99	1.53	-3.53	3.04	.88
AEI emotion management	-.13	.25	-.73	.31	.45
AEI emotional understanding	.42	.23	-.19	.75	.25
Surface-acting	.04	.07	-.06	.20	.27
Deep-acting	.02	.09	-.15	.19	.83
Work engagement	.24	.04	.15	.30	.00**
Model 2					
Constant	15.72	2.93	9.91	21.51	.00**
Sex	-.17	1.43	-3.00	2.66	.91
Absorption	-.02	.14	-.29	.26	.90
Dedication	.50	.14	.23	.77	.00**
Vigor	.26	.13	.00	.52	.049*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

predictor of job satisfaction scores and was positively related to job satisfaction (Table 2).

A follow-up multiple regression examined which component(s) of work engagement (absorption, dedication, vigor) predicted job satisfaction. The model was statistically significant ($F(4, 115) = 15.08$, $p < .001$), accounting for 33% of the variance in job satisfaction scores, with dedication and vigor being significant predictors of job satisfaction (see Table 2).

Mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS for SPSS v.3.3 to test whether EI abilities indirectly predicted job satisfaction through work engagement, surface acting and/ or deep acting (H6 and H7).

Models were not statistically significant for emotion management ($b = -.09$, 95% BCa CI [-.44, .23], $p = .46$) or emotional understanding ($b = -.13$, 95% BCa CI [-.49, .18], $p = .32$), not supporting H6 and H7.

Discussion

This is the first study to examine the inter-relations between ability EI, work engagement, emotional labor and job satisfaction simultaneously in a hospitality population. Our findings suggest work engagement, specifically dedication and vigor, is a better predictor of job satisfaction in hospitality employees compared to EI abilities and emotional labor strategies. However, work engagement and emotional

labor strategies did not mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction.

Surprisingly, emotional labor strategies were not related to EI abilities or job satisfaction which contrasts with other research (e.g., Wen et al., 2019). This may be explained by measurement and sampling differences across studies, with previous studies mostly conducted outside of the UK (e.g. USA, China) and a lack of an overarching conceptual model of emotional labor (Lee & Madera, 2019) which future research should aim to address.

We measured the strategic aspects of ability emotional intelligence only (emotion knowledge; management), whilst other studies have focused on trait EI (e.g., Miao et al., 2017). There is scope to replicate this research incorporating additional, experiential, measures of ability EI (such as emotion perception) alongside Trait EI to look at ways the two may interact to support job satisfaction in high EL occupations. It is now widely accepted that trait EI (typical emotional style) and ability EI (maximal emotional skill) are both necessary to support adaptive behavior (Davis & Nichols, 2016). Moreover, using more innovative data collection methods, such as experiencing sampling (e.g., Bucich & MacCann, 2019), and real time analysis of workers' emotional states (subjective mood and physiology) during periods of work, would allow more fine-grained analysis of the role of both experiential and strategic EI 'in action'. Our study also sampled workers from across hospitality roles (hotels, restaurants) whilst other studies (e.g., Extremera et al., 2018) have sampled a broad range of occupations not including hospitality such as self-employed individuals, managers, builders and administrators.

Finally, despite our findings suggesting EI abilities do not play a significant role in predicting employee's job satisfaction in this sample, it is important to note that there is value in training and selecting for EI in the hospitality sector. For example, EI abilities enable employees to more easily recognize if a customer is unhappy, allowing them to respond in a more efficient way to solve the problem and maintain high quality customer service (e.g., Prentice, 2019). Therefore, beyond employee engagement and satisfaction, it is important that research continues to build on the understanding of emotional intelligence in hospitality populations.

Data availability The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Funding This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration

Conflict of Interest Statement The authors whose names are listed above certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any

organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

References

- Akhtar, R., Boustani, L., Tsivrikos, D., & Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2015). The engageable personality: Personality and trait EI as predictors of work engagement. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 73, 44–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.08.040>
- Allen, V., Rahman, N., Weissman, A., MacCann, C., Lewis, C., & Roberts, R. D. (2015). The Situational Test of Emotional Management–Brief (STEM-B): Development and validation using item response theory and latent class analysis. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 81, 195–200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.01.053>
- Allen, V. D., Weissman, A., Hellwig, S., MacCann, C., & Roberts, R. D. (2014). Development of the Situational Test of Emotional Understanding–Brief (STEU-B) using item response theory. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 65, 3–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.01.051>
- Bucich, M., & MacCann, C. (2019). Emotional intelligence and day-to-day emotion regulation processes: examining motives for social sharing. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 137, 22–26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.08.002>
- Chu, K. H. L., & Murrmann, S. K. (2006). Development and validation of the hospitality emotional labor scale. *Tourism Management*, 27(6), 1181–1191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2005.12.011>
- Czarnota-Bojarska, J. (2015). Counterproductive work behavior and job satisfaction: A surprisingly rocky relationship. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 21(4), 460–470. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2015.15>
- Davis, S. K., & Nichols, R. (2016). Does emotional intelligence have a “dark” side? A review of the literature. *Frontiers in psychology*, 7, 1316. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01316>
- Extremera, N., Mérida-López, S., Sánchez-Álvarez, N., & Quintana-Orts, C. (2018). How Does Emotional Intelligence Make One Feel Better at Work? The Mediation Role of Work Engagement. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 15(9), 1909. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15091909>
- Grandey, A. A. (2003). When “the show must go on”: Surface acting and deep acting as determinants of emotional exhaustion and peer-rated service delivery. *Academy of management Journal*, 46(1), 86–96. <https://doi.org/10.5465/30040678>
- Kim, T., Jung-Eun Yoo, J., Lee, G., & Kim, J. (2012). Emotional intelligence and emotional labor acting strategies among frontline hotel employees. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 24(7), 1029–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09596111211258900>
- Kovacs, C., Stiglbauer, B., Batinic, B., & Gnambs, T. (2018). Exploring different forms of job (dis) satisfaction and their relationship with well-being, motivation and performance. *Applied Psychology*, 67(3), 523–556. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12128>
- Lea, R. G., Davis, S. K., Mahoney, B. K., & Qualter, P. (2019). Does emotional intelligence buffer the effects of acute stress? A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 810. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00810>
- Lee, J. J., & Hwang, J. (2016). An emotional labor perspective on the relationship between customer orientation and job satisfaction. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 54, 139–150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2016.01.008>
- Lee, L., & Madera, J. M. (2019). A systematic literature review of emotional labor research from the hospitality and tourism literature. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 31(7), 2808–2826. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-05-2018-0395>
- Lennard, A. C., Scott, B. A., & Johnson, R. E. (2019). Turning frowns (and smiles) upside down: A multilevel examination of surface acting positive and negative emotions on well-being. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 104(9), 1164. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000400>
- Locke, E. A. (1976). *The nature and causes of job satisfaction*. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology*. Rand McNally.
- Macdonald, S., & MacIntyre, P. (1997). The generic job satisfaction scale: Scale development and its correlates. *Employee Assistance Quarterly*, 13(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1300/J022v13n02_01
- Mayer, J. D., Salovey, P., & Caruso, D. R. (2000). *Emotional intelligence as zeitgeist, as personality, and as a mental ability*. In R. Bar-On & J. D. A. Parker (Eds.), *The handbook of emotional intelligence: Theory, development, assessment, and application at home, school, and in the workplace* (p. 92–117). Jossey-Bass.
- Miao, C., Humphrey, R. H., & Qian, S. (2017). A meta-analysis of emotional intelligence and work attitudes. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 90(2), 177–202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12167>
- Prentice, C. (2019). Managing service encounters with emotional intelligence. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 51, 344–351. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.07.001>
- Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A. B. (2004). Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 25(3), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.248>
- Spector, P. E. (1997). *Job satisfaction: application, assessment, cause, and consequence*. Sage Publications.
- Thor, S. (2012). Organizational excellence: A study of the relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement in process improvement experts. Doctor of Business Administration (DBA). Paper 10. <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dba/10>.
- Tziner, A., Fein, E. C., Kim, S. K., Vasiliu, C., & Shkoler, O. (2020). Combining associations between emotional intelligence, work motivation, and organizational justice with counterproductive work behavior: A profile analysis via multidimensional scaling (PAMS) approach. *Front. Psychol.*, 11, 851. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00851>
- Wen, J., Huang, S. S., & Hou, P. (2019). Emotional intelligence, emotional labor, perceived organizational support, and job satisfaction: a moderated mediation model. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 81, 120–130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2019.01.009>

Publisher’s note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.