

# **Examining the Linkage Between Political Skill, Emotional Labor Strategies, and Individual Outcomes: Evidence from Chinese Hotel Industry**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the linkage between political skill, emotional labor strategies, and two individual level outcomes; emotional exhaustion and subjective career success in the context of Chinese hotel industry. Political skill is hypothesized to have negative impact on surface acting, conversely, it was hypothesized to have positive impact on deep acting. Similarly, political skill is proposed to positively predict subjective career success and negatively to emotional exhaustion. Interactive effect of political skill with subjective career success and emotional exhaustion as outcome with surface acting as antecedent was also proposed. The emotional labor strategies were also hypothesized with emotional exhaustion and subjective career success as outcome variables. The setting of the study were hotels operating in Wuhan, Peoples' Republic of China. Frontline hotel staff responded 212 questionnaires. Covariance based Structural Equations Modeling was used to conduct the factor analysis and test the hypothesis, AMOS V 20.0 was used for the purpose. Results show that political skill is a positive predictor of subjective career success, and a negative predictor emotional exhaustion. Emotional labor strategies were also related with emotional exhaustion and subjective career success as hypothesized. Political skill confirmed the hypothesized interactive effect with surface acting to predict emotional exhaustion and subjective career success. Lastly, the implications for theory, policy, practice and future research have been given.

**Keywords:** Political skill, deep acting, surface acting, subjective career success, emotional exhaustion, hotel industry, China.

## 1. Introduction

Employees working at front lines of service sector organizations are more likely to encounter demanding, oppositional, difficult and irate customers. During these interactions, organizations want their employees to exhibit cheerfulness regardless of their inner states and emotions. Amongst the service sector organizations hospitality employees are more vulnerable to emotional labor due to organizational display rules for insuring friendly and positive interaction with the customers. Emotional labor has been studied and conceptualized by researchers from job-oriented and employee-oriented perspectives (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). The job-oriented perspective deals with the level of emotional labor varying from occupation to occupation. Studies from this standpoint look at emotional labor strategies in terms of length, occurrence, variety and strength of encounters with the customers (Morris & Feldman, 1996). The employee-focused perspective primarily probes into the experiences of employees and the processes involved in dealing with their feelings at workplace (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002).

Past studies have reported positive relationship between the job-specific characteristics (variety, duration, customer interaction) and outcomes like burnout (Morris & Feldman, 1996), but on the other hand jobs that requires similar emotional demands may have varying effects across individuals (Johnson & Spector, 2007; Kim et al., 2012). Employee-focused approach seems to be of immense potential in comprehending emotional labor and its consequences for individuals and organizations. To know about emotional labor from the perspectives of individuals offers a promising avenue, as their perceptions and interpretations of their experiences carry much importance. Keeping in view the individual differences among employees, it is more likely that they may perceive and manage emotional labor differently and thus may result in varied consequences for them. In relation to emotional labor and its consequences, the extant literature has explored individual differences like emotional intelligence (Johnson & Spector, 2007; Kim et al., 2012), interpersonal skill (Park et al., 2014), negative and positive affectivity (Karatepe et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2004), psychological capital (Cheung et al., 2011), intrinsic motivation (Karatepe & Tizabi, 2011), gender (Erickson & Ritter, 2001), age (Dahling & Perez, 2010) and personality traits like extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness (Austin et al., 2008).

This research also intends to benefit the current body of literature by adopting an employee-focused approach towards emotional labor. The current study also intends to examine the role of political skill in choosing between two emotional labor strategies. We also propose to investigate the interactive effect of political skill for the effect of surface acting on emotional exhaustion and subjective career success. Besides this, the direct relationship of political skill with employees' emotional exhaustion and subjective career success has also

been explored. Political skill in association with emotional labor strategies and its outcomes has rarely been investigated in organizational behavior literature. With a few noteworthy exceptions like Liu et al (2004) study in which political skill was reported to be negatively related with perceived emotional labor, but the sample was drawn from diverse occupations excluding hospitality sector. Recently, the role of just only interpersonal dimensions of political skill in buffering the negative effects of surface acting was confirmed in a school setting (Park et al., 2014).

Our study aims intends to add the various strategies of literature such as hospitality literature, emotional labor, career management literature, and organizational politics literature. The study will also contribute to the newly emerged emotional demands-abilities fit concept by emphasizing on political skill in handling emotions effectively. We expect that the outcomes of the study will aid the practitioners in the hospitality sector in their selection and training related decisions.

## **2. Hypotheses Development**

### *2.1 Role of Political Skill*

Ferris et al. (2005) defined the construct of political skill as “the ability to understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objectives” (p. 127). Scholars opine that political skill has implications for emotional labor, however, such a relationship is yet far from a complete empirical understanding (Rutner et al., 2015). While political skill relates to understanding and dealing with others’ emotions, emotional labor involves deep acting and surface acting in order to cope with one’s own emotions. Rutner et al. (2015) opine that in order to understand and regulate others’ emotions, particular skills are required, such as political skill. Employees astute in political behavior are more adept at wearing emotions required for a particular situation (Ferris et al., 2007). Grandey et al. (2013) maintain that customers respond better while they perceive that the treatment, they receive from employees is authentic. Customers judge the emotional expressions of the employees towards them. Those possessing stronger political skill can delve down and appear to be genuine rather than fake. Contrarily, those who lack political skill appear fake if they try to emulate a particular behavior in a given situation (Rutner et al., 2015).

In a recent attempt to decipher the linkage between political skill and emotional labor, Toomey et al. (2020) grounded upon the SOC-ER model (Selection, Optimization, and Compensation with Emotion Regulation) presented by Urry and Gross (2010). According to this model, emotional regulation is a resource intensive process. Those individuals who possess more emotion-relevant resources are able to control their emotions. Ahearn et al. (2004) opines that politically skilled people are emotionally competent. They can understand the intentions of others, can establish relationships by easily manipulating their own and others’ emotions. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

- H1(a): Political skill will have positive effect on deep acting.

- H1(b): Political skill will have negative effect on surface acting.

Researchers have been investigating the role of political skill in effective coping with workplace stressors. Job-demand control model coined by Van der Doef and Maes (1999) considers psychological strain as an outcome of the interface between the level of freedom allowed in decision making the demands of the job. Politically skilled persons are good at managing their dealings with others. They are socially astute and have better interpersonal acumen. When faced with workplace stressors, Resultantly, they experience less psychological strain than less politically skilled colleagues.

Conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) proposes that coping with workplace stressors depends on the resources available to an individual which may include conditions, objects, personal attributes and energies. People strive to get and maintain such resources, and failing to do so may cause stress. Political skill might be considered as a kind of a resource for an individual. This resource becomes a buffer against stressors. Their networking and influencing capabilities assist them in handling the requirements of the job, thus, causing in reduced level of stress (Harvey et al., 2007). The socially astute individuals can aptly understand people, and they can control the situation and influence others (Brouer et al., 2006). Hence, it may be inferred that that politically skilled employees will be less affected by the stressors. The following hypotheses are proposed:

- H2(a): Political skill is negatively related with emotional exhaustion.
- H2(b): Political skill will inversely moderate the effect of surface acting on emotional exhaustion.

Subjective career success may be defined as the positive psychological outcomes or accomplishments that one achieves through experiences gained at the workplace (Judge et al., 1999). Political skill has a significant role in shaping employees' perception about their career related accomplishments. Employees who are socially astute, good at social networking, can influence others and can exhibit sincerity towards others will be able to acquire the things they want in their careers and lives (Treadway et al., 2005). Thus, the people with politically skills are usually more satisfied in their lives in general and their careers in particular as compared to less politically skilled people.

According to social influence theory, individuals try to nurture and maintain valuable social relationships (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). High quality workplace relationships in turn may lead to enhanced career and life satisfaction. Political skill assists employees in nurturing and maintaining such relationships. Greenberger and Strasser's (1986) personal control model suggest that employees compare the control desired by them with control they possess, and in case of imbalance, tries to change the situation through their cognitive and behavioral responses. The theory of personal control serves us in suggesting that politically skilled individuals will report higher level of subjective career success, as they are better able to achieve the desired balance through their political skill. Thus, employees

who perceive their career and life satisfaction to be less than optimal will try to enhance their subjective wellbeing by incorporating political skill in their workplace interactions. Recently Fidan and Koç (2022) found that amongst the school teachers, political skill is positively linked with career success. Hence, a direct positive effect of political skill on frontline employees' career success is predicted. Besides this, interaction effect of political skill between surface acting and subjective career success is also proposed as the political skill as a potential moderating variable has already been established in literature (Moon & Morais, 2022). From the discussion above, we deduce the following hypotheses:

- H3(a): Political skill is positively related with subjective career success.
- H3(b): Political skill will weaken the negative effect of surface acting on subjective career success.

## 2.2 *Emotional Labor and individual outcomes*

Hochschild (1983) first conceived the idea of emotional labor as “the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (p. 7). According to Grandey (2000), “emotional labor is the process of regulating both feelings and expressions for the organizational goals” (p. 97). To regulate emotions and to cope with emotional labor, two major strategies have been the focus of research, i.e., surface acting and deep acting. According to Güler et al. (2022), further investigation about the emotional labor will help us explain various organizational and individual outcomes.

Surface acting means faking emotions by either suppressing or feigning the felt and unfeared emotions respectively (Groth et al., 2009). While someone engages in surface acting, there is a change in body language and facial expressions only. However, the inner state remains unchanged. Contrarily, the inner state remains and outer expressions are similar in deep acting (Diefendorff et al., 2005). The emotions are changed through cognitive reappraisal or attentional deployment by putting oneself in the shoes of the service recipient (Grandey, 2000). Deep acting can be termed as “acting in good faith” while surface acting as “acting in bad faith” (Grandey, 2003).

Muraven et al (2000) have observed that to regulate one's emotions and purposefully control oneself results in the exhaustion of mental resources. Surface acting is an effortful practice of regulating emotions through continuous observance of actual and preferred emotions. Previous studies have revealed that response-focused emotional regulation is more likely to result in poor mental performance as compared to antecedent-focused emotional regulation, as the former is more effortful than the latter (Richards & Gross, 2000; Zyphur et al., 2007). As surface acting builds on a responsive emotional regulation strategy, thus, it may lead to the exertion of increased mental effort. The continuous mental efforts on part of employees involved in surface acting will result in the depletion of mental resources and may cause strain and psychological ill-being (Grandey, 2003).

In case of deep acting, a congruence exists amid the experienced and the expressed emotions and thus may result in enhanced authenticity. These arguments and empirical

investigations suggest that surface acting negatively affects employees' psychological wellbeing. Compliance with the emotional display requisites is an important indicator of job performance for those who frequently interact with customers. The rationale for display rules lies in the assumption that displaying positive emotions will influence the customers in a positive way. Emotions as social information model also suggest that emotional display influences the behavior of the observers by conveying important information to them (Van Kleef, 2009).

Conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989) considers satisfying and successful social relationship at work as resource, which can assist in buffering against stress in the workplace and would result in positive job attitudes. Surface acting is just an alteration in body language and facial expressions; thus, the individual has to keep the original emotion by faking the outer expression. Gross and John (2003) argue that the suppressed emotions are negative and may harm the individual's psychological well-being. In a recent study of nurses, Hong et al. (2023) revealed that surface acting would positively predict emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, in comparison to surface acting, deep acting alters the negative emotions into positive by altering the inner emotional state. This leads to an overall positive experience on part of the deep actor, as positive emotions have been associated with positive mind-set, broaden cognition, and enhanced personal resources in coping mechanisms (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Amissah et al. (2022) established that deep acting does not cause emotional exhaustion. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

- H4 (a): Employees involved in surface acting are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion.
- H4 (b): Employees involved in deep acting are less likely to experience emotional exhaustion.

Besides emotional exhaustion, we intend to explore the subjective career success of front-line employees in relation to the two emotional labor strategies mentioned above. The subjective career success denotes to the employees' overall positive reactions and expression of satisfaction towards their careers (Arthur et al., 2005). According to affective events theory, employees' evaluation of their jobs depends on their affective experiences at work (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). It has been shown that the job satisfaction is linked to the experiences of positive and negative emotions at work (Fisher, 2002). The mechanisms involved in surface acting and negative affective events result in depletion of mental resources, low sense of authenticity, negative emotions, and lack of rewarding relationship, thus employees will tend to evaluate their careers negatively. Repeated negative events in the workplace may influence employees' subjective evaluation of their careers. Contrarily, deep acting is linked with positive consequences such as job satisfaction, improved authenticity, and overall positive interaction with the customers, as the interacting atmosphere is characterized by positive emotions. Resultantly, employees evaluate their careers positively. In a recent study, surface acting and job satisfaction were

negatively related, whereas, deep acting and job satisfaction had a positive relationship (Amissah et al., 2022). Thus, it may deduce that the emotional labor strategy adopted by an employee will influence his/her subjective career success. The following hypotheses are proposed:

- H5 (a): Surface acting will negatively affect employees’ subjective career success.
- H5 (b): Deep acting will positively affect employees’ subjective career success.

The above discussion is summed up as follows:

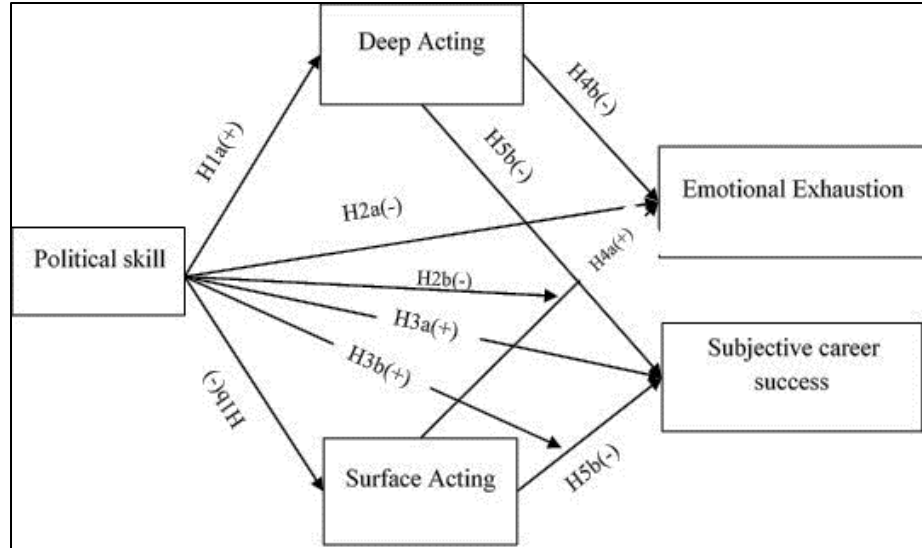


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants and Procedure

Data was obtained through questionnaires from the frontline employees of hotels in Wuhan city situated in Hubei province of China. Wuhan is the most populated city in central China and is a famous tourist destination due to her scenic and historical attractions. Frontline employees including reservation agents, receptionists, telephone operators, concierges and guest relations representatives were the respondents in this study. A total of 48 hotel managers were requested for a meeting in order to get permission and to make a briefing about the study. Through acquaintances and personal contacts in the hotel industry, the authors were able to assure the agreement and cooperation of 28 hotel managers. Among the 28 hotels just 2 were five stars, 10 were four stars and the remaining were 3-star hotels. An online questionnaire was distributed among 356 potential respondents out of which 238 were returned. Among the filled questionnaires, 26 were found incomplete and were

discarded, thus, the final analysis was performed on a sample of 212 questionnaires. The sample size was considered appropriate for statistical purpose as the as per the recommendations of Hair et al. (2014) for the application of structural equations modelling. Respondents' mean age was 26.56 years (17 to 52 years old). Mean work experience of the respondents was 5.62 years (0.7 to 19 years). Majority of the respondents were female, i.e., 76.7%.

For the analysis, CB-SEM (Covariance Based Structural Equations Modelling) was used. CB-SEM was preferred over the competing approaching, PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equations Modelling) as per the recommendations of Hair et al. (2017). CB-SEM approach is followed for the confirmation, whereas, PLS-SEM is more relevant where the objective is primarily exploratory. To test the hypotheses, we followed the recommendation of Anderson and Gerbing (1988). CB-SEM using AMOS 20 was applied in two steps. First, the factor model was evaluated to establish the reliability and validity of measures. Later using the structural regression, we tested the hypotheses.

### *3.2 Measures*

Surface and deep acting was measured with items from Diefendorff et al (2005) which were adapted by them from Grandey's (2003) scales of surface and deep acting. A 5-point Likert type scale was used for rating the questionnaire items. The reported reliability for 7 items of surface acting was  $\alpha = .91$  and for 4 items of deep acting was  $\alpha = .87$ .

Political skill was measured by using the 18-item political skill inventory (Ferris et al., 2005). The reported reliability for the inventory was  $\alpha = .89$ .

Emotional exhaustion was measured using Schaufeli's (1995) "the general burnout inventory". A 5-point Likert scale was used for rating the items. Sample item representing emotional exhaustion is "I feel emotionally drained from my work" and sample item for reduced personal accomplishment is "I feel very energetic when doing my job". The reported reliability for emotional exhaustion was  $\alpha = .89$  and  $.82$  respectively.

Subjective career success was measured using career satisfaction scale of Greenhaus et al. (1990). The respondents were instructed to indicate their agreement or disagreement with statements like "I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career". The reported alpha coefficient for this scale was  $.90$ .

### *3.3 Translation of the Instrument*

The questionnaire items were translated from English into Mandarin by an expert in both languages. Brislin et al (1973) back-translation method was followed by translating the Mandarin items back into English by another expert. Thus, similarity in meaning was insured between the English and Mandarin version.



**4. Data Analysis and Results**

*4.1 Descriptive Statistics*

The following table shows means, standard deviations, and correlations among constructs. All the constructs were significantly correlated (see Table 1). The table shows that political skill is positively correlated with deep acting and subjective career success, whereas, it is negatively correlated with surface acting and emotional exhaustion. Emotional labor strategy, deep acting, is negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion whereas, it is positively correlated with subjective career success. Further, the surface acting was positively correlated with emotional exhaustion, but negatively correlated with subjective career success.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. PS	3.520	.590	1				
2. DA	3.630	.729	.416	1			
3. SA	3.400	.848	-.357	.506	1		
4. EE	3.490	.722	-.329	-.416	.403	1	
5. SCS	3.970	.857	.450	.553	-.419	.396	1

PS=Political Skill, Deep Acting=DA, Surface Acting=SA, EE=Emotional Exhaustion, SCS=Subjective Career Success. All correlations are significant at  $p < .001$

*4.2 Assessment of Measurement Model*

In the measurement model there were five latent variables. Except one, political skill, all other variables were first order constructs. The political skill was a second order construct. It had four factors. The model was tested using AMOS 21. We assessed the confirmatory model using the fit criteria suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999).

The hypothesized confirmatory factor model showed a good fit with all fit statistics within the range (CMIN/df=1.493, CFI=.977, TLI=.935 and RMSEA=.075). To further establish the validity of measurement model, an alternate measurement model was subjected to evaluation. In the alternate model, political skill was changed into first order. The model fit could not be achieved (CMIN/df=4.157 CFI=.738 TLI=.702 and RMSEA=.031). It confirmed our hypothesized measurement model and showed that the political skill was a higher order construct.

Further, reliability and validity of constructs were evaluated. We followed the procedure specified by Hair et al. (2014). All the measures crossed the threshold of 0.70 for composite reliability. All the measure extracted an average variance of more than 0.50, showing convergent validity. The discriminant validity was measured by matching ASV and MSV with AVE. Hair et al. (2014) argues that for a construct to have discriminant validity, the ASV and MSV should fall below the convergent validity. The analysis shows that all variables established discriminant validity (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Reliability and Validity (Measures / Constructs)**

<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Composite Reliability (CR)</b>	<b>Average Variance Extracted (AVE)</b>	<b>Maximum Shared Variance (MSV)</b>	<b>Average Shared Variance (ASV)</b>
<b>PS</b>	0.869	0.632	0.203	0.153
<b>DA</b>	0.840	0.515	0.306	0.227
<b>SA</b>	0.873	0.583	0.256	0.180
<b>EE</b>	0.901	0.541	0.162	0.150
<b>SCS</b>	0.721	0.502	0.306	0.210

#### 4.3 Results of Hypotheses

##### 4.3.1 Direct Effects

Structural regression was applied on the data in order to test hypotheses (H1a, H1b, H2a, H3a, H4a, H4b, H5a, H5b). The structural model had a perfect fit (CMIN/df=1.549, CFI=0.969, TLI=0.930, RMSEA=0.076). Political skill had significant negative influence on the surface acting ( $\beta=-0.36$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and positive on deep acting ( $\beta=0.42$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) with model explained variance of 13% and 17% respectively. Emotional exhaustion was negatively affected by political skill ( $\beta=-0.73$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and deep acting ( $\beta=-0.54$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) while surface acting had positive influence on emotional exhaustion ( $\beta=-0.42$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Together all the variables explained 52% variance in emotional exhaustion. Further, subjective career success was positively influenced by political skill ( $\beta=-0.25$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and deep acting ( $\beta=0.39$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), whereas, surface acting had negative influence on subjective career success ( $\beta=-0.14$ ,  $p<0.016$ ).

**Table 3: Regression Results**

Hypothesized Paths	Coefficients	Standard Error	P-value	R-Square
PS→SA	-0.36	.068	***	0.13
PS→DA	0.42	.049	***	0.17
PS→EE (-)	-0.73	.047	***	0.52
DA→EE (-)	-0.54	.039	***	
SA→EE	0.42	.034	***	
PS→SCS	0.25	.041	***	0.35
DA→SCS	0.39	.050	***	
SA→SCS (-)	-0.14	.036	.016	

\*\*\*=P<0.001

The results provide that political skill affects emotional labor strategies. It has a negative effect on surface acting, positive on deep acting. In a recent study, to chart out the effect of political skill on (momentary) surface acting and (momentary) deep acting, the results remained inconclusive (Toomey et al., 2020). They grounded upon the SOC-ER model proposed by Urry and Gross (2010) and following the experience sampling methodology studied the full-time university employees. Toomey et al. (2020) were interested to study the emotional labor outside of the traditional frontline roles in daily interactions, such as with peers and supervisors. The present study offers contrasting results as we specifically study frontline employees of the hotel industry, where, both the political skill and emotional labor strategies are the need of the role to be performed. Here, some interesting revelations emerge. First, for the exercise of political skill and emotional labor strategies, the particular role to be played by the employees comes into play. Second, the context of the organization, such as for-profit or non-for-profit also matters for such behaviors to come into play.

Political skill was negatively related with emotional exhaustion. Those higher on political skill were less emotionally exhausted. To relate the organizational politics with emotional exhaustion, (Chan & James, 2020) established that organizational politics was positively linked with emotional exhaustion. The apparently contrasting results owe to two importance dimensions. In the present study, we investigate the political skill at the individual, whereas, Chan and James (2020) studied the phenomenon of organizational politics at the group level. To compare the results, it is important to note the both have different manifestations. Organizational politics happen in collectivity. Political skill is an individual behavior. Those apt in political skill would less likely be influenced by the

politics happening around, rather, would take part in it not harming themselves less emotionally. Rather, at times, political skill may become buffer for dealing with emotional exhaustion (Karatepe et al., 2019). The outcomes of this study are further supported by De Clercq et al. (2022) who in a survey of multiple industries provided that political ineptness is positively related with emotional exhaustion.

Political skill showed a positive effect on subjective career success. Similar results have been reported by Fidan and Koç (2022). They studied the school teachers and provided that those who are more politically skilled draw more career satisfaction. The fundamental assumption which the Fidan and Koç (2022) grounded upon was derived from social influence theory (Kelman, 2006) and argued that political skill enables to exert influence and gain favors. Likewise, (Lee et al., 2019) found that R&D personnel employ their political skill to grow their career aspirations. (Hayek et al., 2018) studied the phenomenon of political skill and career success in Ecuadorian Family firms. The results of the present study, however, hail from a unique context not explored earlier.

Furthermore, emotional labor strategies were investigated in relation to emotional exhaustion and career success. Surface acting showed a positive effect on emotional exhaustion, whereas, deep acting had a negative effect on emotional exhaustion. In a study of final year nursing students, Hong et al. (2023) concluded that those students were more engaged in surface acting were more emotionally exhausted. In the context of Ghanaian hospitality industry, Amisah et al. (2022) provided that deep acting had a positive effect on emotional exhaustion. We provide evidence from the Chinese context to establish the linkage between emotional labor strategies and emotional exhaustion. Similarly, off the emotional labor strategies, surface acting had a negative effect on subjective career success. Deep acting had a positive effect on subjective career success. In earlier studies, emotional labor strategies were investigated in relationship to job satisfaction instead of subjective career success. Lee (2021) inferred that only deep acting is directly related to job satisfaction in a public service context. Amisah et al. (2022) held that surface is inversely related to job satisfaction. Since subjective career is an individual's subjective evaluation of their job, hence may be regarded as akin to job satisfaction. Therefore, our results not only coincide with the previous findings, in addition, are contextual.

#### 4.3.2. Moderating Effects

The structural model for moderating effects of political skill (H2b, H3b) were also fit to the data (CMIN/df=1.673, CFI=.931, TLI=.905 and RMSEA=.054). In order to test two-way interaction moderation, an interaction terms were created by multiplying surface acting and political skill. The results confirm that political skill decreases the strength of effect.

The moderating effect of political for the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion was inverse such that it weakened the strength of effect of surface acting on

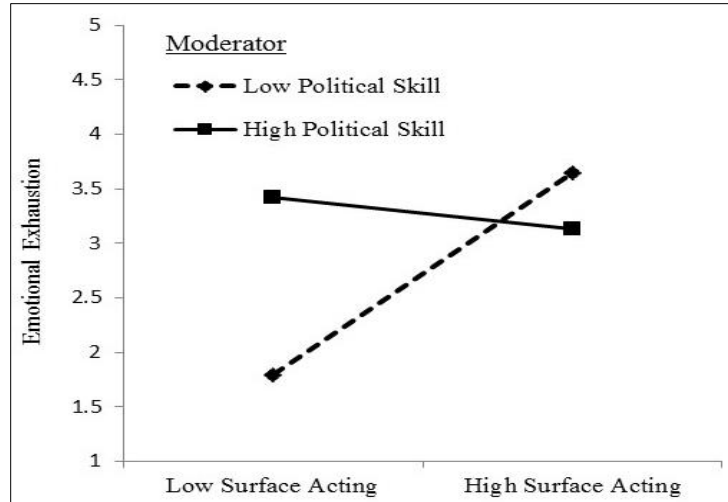
emotional exhaustion. The politically skilled individuals were less emotionally exhausted by engaging in surface acting whereas, those employees who were less politically skilled showed more emotional exhaustion while they engaged in surface acting. Previous studies have related political skill with various work-related outcomes; however, such stream of studies have not shown political skill in a buffering relationship for the effect of surface acting on emotional exhaustion and subjective career success (e.g., Munyon et al., 2015; Usman et al., 2022). While engaged in surface acting, the employees are at a loss of cognitive resources leading them to the conditions of distress, and dissatisfaction. This study theorizes and empirically shows that employees having political skill are likely to cope with the loss of resources while they have to involve in surface acting, and are therefore less emotionally exhausted compared to those having lower level of political skill. The politically skilled employees can better cope with their career dissatisfaction arising out of the surface acting. This might be attributed to the reason that they may convince themselves of the existence of various avenues where they can expend their political aptness to gain career favors.

**Table 4: Interactive Effect of Political Skill**

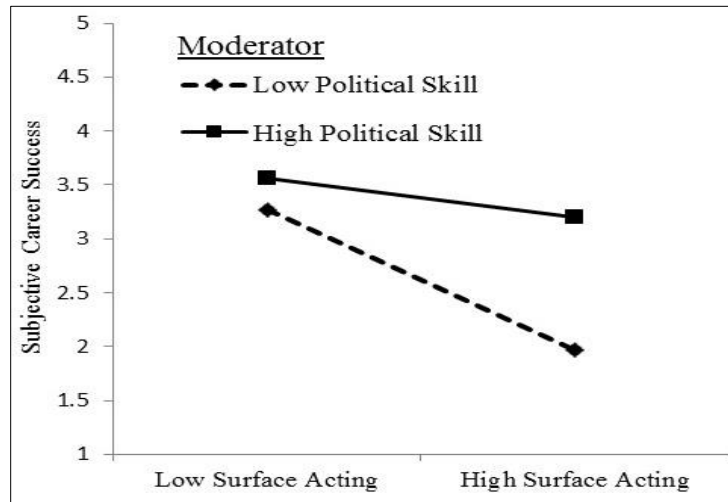
	Unstandardized $\beta$ (H2b)	Unstandardized $\beta$ (H3b)
<b>Emotional Exhaustion - Dependent Variable</b>		
SA→EE	0.393***	
PS→EE	-0.278***	
SA×PS→EE	-0.534*	
<b>Subjective Career Success - Dependent Variable</b>		
SA→SCS		-0.417***
PS→SCS		0.381***
SA×PS→SCS		-0.237*

\*\*\*=p<.001, \*\*=p<.01, \*=p<.05

The interaction effects have further been probed in the following graphs. Political skill decreases the strength of positive relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion (see Figure 2). Politically skilled employees were less emotionally exhausted while doing surface acting than those who were not politically skilled. Similarly, politically skilled employees were better likely to move up the ladder of career success (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2: Moderating Effect of PS on the Relationship Between SA and EE**



**Figure 3: Moderating Effect of PS on the Relationship Between SA and SCS**

### 5. Discussion

The study has notable contributions for various streams of literature, i.e., emotional labor, political skill, emotional exhaustion, and career management. It establishes the role of emotional labor strategies for emotional exhaustion and subjective career success. The

study, moreover, identifies the role of emotional labor as a mediating mechanism. Meanwhile, political skill not only proves as an antecedent of emotional labor and subjective career success, but also proves as a buffer for the impact of emotional labor strategies on employees' emotional exhaustion and subjective career success. There are also important lessons for policy and practice.

The results confirmed that surface acting has a positive impact on emotional exhaustion and deep acting has negative impact on emotional exhaustion of employees. Moreover, surface acting was negatively related with subjective career success, whereas, deep acting was positively related with subjective career success. Previous studies have ignored these outcomes and have focused upon co-worker related or organizationally focused outcomes (Deng et al., 2017). It is argued that while emotional labor strategies are adopted by employees to achieve the assigned goals, a prime concern, though mainly neglected, is how such strategies are consequential to employee well-being.

On the one side, surface acting was positively associated with emotional exhaustion, on the other, it was negatively related with subjective career success. In a hospitality context, the employees have to engage with the customers in a standard manner to deliver excellent service, study of surface acting is imperative. Such a shallow demonstration of emotions induces stress and causes emotional exhaustion (Wan, 2013). The results are in line with (Diestel & Schmidt, 2012) that displaying the fake emotions in the longer run cause a variety of long-lasting psychological effects such as depersonalization and emotional depletion. Surface acting, however, had a negative effect on subjective career success. Subjective career success connotes the satisfaction one draws from being into a particular career. While an employee engages into surface acting, he/she may find himself disconnected with the pleasure to be driven from the job. The displeasure caused by the surface acting is tantamount to satisfaction. Furthermore, as Grandey (2003) puts up that surface acting is akin to "faking in bad faith" (p. 87), and such faking has empirically been found to be related with negative affectivity (Yin et al., 2013). Our conclusions are aligned with these.

Deep acting was negatively associated with the emotional exhaustion, whereas, it has positive effect on subjective career success. It connotes that the emotional labor strategy is utilized by employees with a positive thinking to regulate their emotions. Such a positive thinking saves from depletion of emotional resources (Chen et al., 2019), and therefore, does not cause emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, in the deep acting strategy, the focus is on intrinsic motivation through the positive psychological processes. In deep acting, the inner and outer emotional expressions are consistent and contribute to the sense of achievement. In this manner, and in contrast to the surface acting which is resource depletion mechanism, deep acting becomes a resource acquisition process and consequently it relates to emotional exhaustion negatively (Chen et al., 2019). This conclusion is aligned with the results of Deng et al. (2017) who provided that deep acting does not cause resource depletion rather otherwise. The effect of deep acting can also be

explained on similar lines. As is held that deep acting encompasses resource acquisition, the positive energy therefore may help employees perform their tasks at workplace efficiently. Efficient job performance thus leads to subjective career success as the findings establish.

It was hypothesized that political skill has a negative effect on surface acting while a positive effect on deep acting, the same were proved. These findings are similar to Toomey et al. (2020). These results have also validated the SOC-ER model in the Chinese context. Political skill is an emotional resource which helps regulate the emotional actions at work such surface acting, and deep acting. Rutner et al. (2015) have also concluded similar findings. The job description of hotel employee is such that they are exposed to diverse interactions in the workplace and have a challenge to hold their emotion. The study proved that SOC-ER model is useful to explain the behavior adopted by the hotel employees.

Political skill proved a positive predictor of subjective career success. These results coincide with the previous studies (Hayek et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Lu & Guy, 2016; Usman et al., 2022), albeit in a different context. In an organizational context, subjective career success may also be achieved through social influence. Political skill is instrumental in exerting the social influence. Social influence then results in achieving career success as argued by Todd et al. (2009). This study confirms the same. A similar contention was made by Munyon et al. (2015) that political skill, as a social influence mechanism, impacts many outcomes at personal level, and group levels. Our results are also in line with Hayek et al. (2018) who opined politically skilled individuals gain more success in their careers as they use their skill as an intrapsychic resource. Moreover, the results in our setting are similar to a study in Chinese setting (Lu & Guy, 2016), political skill was found to positively predict various career outcomes. We infer that since both settings are marked by a collectivist cultural orientation in which there is larger scope for the practice of politically oriented behaviors at the workplaces.

The hypothesis that political skill is negatively related with emotional exhaustion was accepted. These results coincide with the studies of Chan and James (2020) and Karatepe et al. (2019). They also concluded that political phenomenon at the individual level does not relate with emotional exhaustion. In fact, the political skill helps individuals deal with anxiety. In an organizational environment, employees have to interact with the people around, political skill supports them handle such interactions as they are socially astute and can leave interpersonal influence. Emotional challenges are also caused by unpredictability in the interactions, politically skilled individuals can also easily manage such unpredictability. Furthermore, politically skilled individuals have more self-control than others and hence, feel lesser psychological stress causing exhaustion.



### *5.2 Implications for Practice*

The results highlight the significance of political skill/behavior in organizations. The study highlights the importance of the identification of political skill among the prospective candidates during recruitment process. Politically skilled employees engage in deep acting and exhausted emotionally less than others. Typically, such talents are needed for those on the frontline positions involved in public dealing such as with other employees and customers. Furthermore, efforts should be made to identify those employees amongst the existing workforce who potentially may have political skill and may engage in political behavior as and when needed.

An important lesson that this study draws for managers is that political skill is not a negative phenomenon. Whereas, it has positive outcomes at the individual, it may be beneficial at the organization level also. Historically, such a skill used to be referred as a dispositional personality trait, it has now been established that political skill is teachable (Ferris et al., 2007). In this backdrop, the recruitment and selection decisions should be driven by the identification of political skills among the incumbents, while, training module should be featured upon the enhancement of political skills. During recruitment, as advised by Rutner et al. (2015), the recruiter/interviewer may take reference from political skill inventory in order to ascertain the political skills amongst the candidates. However, care should be taken to devise political skills training programs. Ferris et al. (2007) advised that such training may not be effectively imparted using typical lecture-based methods, rather, role play, behavioral modeling, and video-taped scenarios can be more effective strategies. Another benefit of hiring politically skilled employees is that such employees would be capable to socialize and integrate into the organizational climate more easily.

Likewise, the identification of emotional labor strategies amongst the employees are also imperative for the better performance of jobs, particularly, the front line job. The study established that those engaged in surface acting are more likely to get emotionally exhausted, while, those engaged in deep acting have an inverse relationship with emotional exhaustion. Therefore, for the customer-contact jobs, the candidates with deep acting quality would better serve the purpose.

Furthermore, as the results suggest, understanding and managing the emotional needs employees is of utmost importance for the managers. Apart from political aptness and the inclination to adopt emotional labor strategies, it is also imperative for the managers to identify the emotional exhaustion barometer of prospective employees at the time of recruitment. Those employees who are easily emotionally exhausted are not an appropriate choice for various frontline positions in particular. Such employees would not only give lower level of performance, but, can also harm the relationship of the organization with her clients. They may act in an unfavorable manner while under emotional distress.

### 5.3 Limitations and Future Recommendations

There are few limitations in this study which may restrain the generalizability. First, all the measures were self-reported. Self-reports measures usually have a problem of method variance. For common variance, we adopted an ex-post measure at the time of data analysis. Following the guidelines of Podsakoff et al. (2003), we adopted an ex-post measure. A common latent factor was integrated into the measurement model. The results showed no indications of bias. For future studies, we advise ex-ante measures at the data collection step. Political skill may be taken as a peer-report rather than self-report. Given the nature of other constructs, subjective career success, emotional exhaustion, emotional labor strategies, self-reports shall suffice.

Another notable limitation might be the collection of data in a cross-sectional manner. The cross-sectional design is a barrier to claim the establishment of causality. The practice of political skill happens first before one enjoys career success or experiences emotional exhaustion. This is practical logic should be maintained at the design stage as well. In the regard, time lagged data collection method is advisable in studies involving political skill as antecedent.

In future studies, we recommend the inclusion of various individual level and organizational level outcomes of political skill. At the individual level, creativity, innovative behavior, and proactivity may be studied in relation to both political skill and emotional labor. At the organizational level, variable such as productivity, customer retention, and group/team performance may be studied. Multi-level modelling would also add significantly to the literature. Furthermore, data should be taken from diverse sectors, for example, banking and telecommunications, where the front-line jobs are vital for the overall success of the organization.

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