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Between surface and deep acting: a phenomenological study of emotional labor among tour guides and travel agency operational staff

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ABSTRACT

Research on emotional labor in tourism relies mainly on hotel surveys and has not compared tour guides and office-based operational staff within the same organization. Grandey's (2000) seminal model assumes organizationally codified display rules whereas tourism-specific antecedent models emphasize prolonged interaction duration. This descriptive-transcendental phenomenological study addresses that gap with twelve informants (seven tour guides, five operational staff) from five licensed travel agencies in Semarang, Indonesia. Before data collection, two experienced academics reviewed the semi-structured interview guide, and it was pilot-tested in two interviews outside the sample. Interviews, participant observation, and reflective field notes were analyzed using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method in Atlas.ti. Thematic saturation was reached when no substantive new codes emerged after the eleventh interview, confirmed by the twelfth. Credibility was established through source triangulation, independent double coding (33% of transcripts; 87% agreement) and member checking with four informants; dependability was supported by an Atlas.ti audit trail and peer debriefing. Ten of twelve informants reported post-work emotional exhaustion, all twelve described unwritten yet binding display rules, and eight concealed personal distress for tourists. Strategies shifted from surface acting toward deep acting with tenure, and three informants with strong personal attachment to the profession described genuine expression. Exhaustion and a sense of meaningful work co-occurred in at least five informants. Extending Grandey (2000) and Busoi et al. (2022), the study makes three contributions: it extends the surface/deep/genuine typology to a previously uncompared pairing of field-based guides and office-based operational staff; it proposes interaction frequency, alongside duration, as a testable antecedent of emotional labor; and it foregrounds genuine expression as a marker of sustainable emotion regulation. Travel agencies, particularly SMEs, should treat emotional labor as a trainable competence.

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Introduction

Often described as the "smile industry," tourism depends heavily on the warmth, amiability, and enthusiasm displayed by frontline personnel including tour guides and travel agency operational staff because these qualities strongly shape tourists' service experience (Hillman, 2023). Beneath outwardly spontaneous smiles and courteous greetings lies a psychological mechanism that Hochschild (1983) conceptualized as emotional

labor: the regulation of affect to produce publicly observable facial and bodily expressions consistent with organizational display rules. Grandey (2000) later elaborated this construct through an emotion-regulation framework distinguishing two principal strategies surface acting, in which unfelt emotions are displayed, and deep acting, in which internal cognitive effort is used to genuinely feel the emotion the role demands. These strategies carry divergent psychological consequences: surface acting is consistently associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout, whereas deep acting can foster greater job satisfaction even as it still consumes psychological resources over time (Amissah et al., 2022; Jalilzadeh et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2020). A recent editorial synthesis confirms that this basic pattern continues to structure research on emotional labor across service industries more than two decades after Grandey's original formulation, even as scholars increasingly debate which theoretical lens best explains it (Yoo et al., 2025).

Tour guides and travel agency operational staff occupy a position highly exposed to the demands of emotional labor because their work involves andeither prolonged, high-intensity face-to-face contact (tour guides) or brief, frequent, multi-channel contact (operational staff), together with frequent unplanned events such as tourist complaints, schedule delays, or supplier failures (Busoi et al., 2022; Hillman, 2023). The expectation that they continually appear friendly, patient, and enthusiastic regardless of their private emotional state places this occupation among the service roles carrying the heaviest emotional labor burden (Alrawadieha & Dincer, 2021). Two theoretical accounts currently compete to explain this burden. The dominant Hochschild-Grandey lineage treats emotional labor primarily as an act of emotion regulation performed to satisfy organizational display rules. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) and Conservation of Resources (COR) traditions instead treat emotional labor as one demand among several that depletes a finite pool of psychological resources, with burnout or work alienation occurring only when demands outpace the resources such as managerial support or service orientation available to offset them (Lei & Kuok, 2025; Üngüren et al., 2025). Meta-analytic, bibliometric and empirical evidence supports both accounts without fully reconciling them: emotional labor's consequences depend on the specific strategy used, the resources available to the worker, and situational cognitive appraisal rather than on the job role alone (Abubakar et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2025; Lukić Nikolić & Garabinović, 2023). This study does not adjudicate between the two traditions; rather, it uses Hochschild and Grandey's categories to describe informants' lived strategies while drawing on COR theory in the Discussion to interpret why those strategies change over time.

Semarang, a key tourism and MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Convention, Exhibition) hub in Central Java Province, offers a relevant yet comparatively underexamined research setting. City records list at least 43 travel agencies officially registered in Semarang (Pemerintah Kota Semarang, 2024), all of which depend on tour guides and frontline operational personnel to sustain their service reputation. This figure describes the population from which the present sample was drawn rather than a claim about the province's wider tourism economy; formal institutional support for the emotional well-being of SME-scale tourism workers nevertheless remains comparatively limited and largely informal (Hermawati & Sembhodo, 2024; Pusparani et al., 2025).

Research on emotional labor in tourism and hospitality has, until now, been shaped mostly by quantitative traditions. Using large-scale surveys and structural modeling, scholars have examined how surface acting, deep acting, emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, and turnover intention relate to one another (Knežević et al., 2021; Leal & Carvalho, 2023; Lei & Kuok, 2025; Shulga et al., 2024). Such work yields statistically useful generalizations but often reduces emotional labor to a measurable variable, detached from the everyday subjective meanings workers themselves attach to it. A systematic review of how tour guiding is transforming finds that affective dimensions, including emotional labor, remain among the least thoroughly investigated aspects of the role relative to technical and digital competence (Pusparani et al., 2025). Phenomenological inquiries into tour guides' emotional labor are beginning to appear for instance, a study of gender and emotional labor among tour guides in Bali (Febrianty et al., 2024) and a study of front office employees' hospitality in an Indonesian hotel (Apriyani, 2025) but such studies remain few, and none has yet examined travel agency operational staff alongside tour guides within the same organizations.

A specific gap remains where emotional labor theory intersects with the lived experience of frontline tourism personnel in Indonesia. Prior scholarship tends to (a) examine large hotels while overlooking small and medium-sized travel agencies (Amissah et al., 2022; Leal & Carvalho, 2023), (b) rely on questionnaires that treat emotional labor as a uniform experience across individuals, or (c) fail to distinguish the realities of field-based guides from those of office-based operational staff who handle complaints, cancellations, and supplier coordination. This last omission is not merely descriptive: if brief but frequent desk-based interactions generate emotional demands comparable to the sustained field exposure of tour guides, as the JD-R and COR literatures would predict (Lei & Kuok, 2025; Üngüren et al., 2025), then existing emotional

labor theory built primarily on occupations with continuous, high-intensity customer contact may understate the emotional demands of shorter, high-frequency service encounters. No study to date has tested this possibility by directly comparing the two occupational groups within a single organizational setting. The present study addresses this gap and, in doing so, offers an empirical basis for extending antecedent models of tourism emotional labor (Busoi et al., 2022) beyond duration-based accounts of exposure.

The present study focuses on tour guides and operational personnel employed by travel agencies in Semarang. It uses a descriptive-transcendental phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994), grounded in the epistemological premise that emotional labor cannot be reduced to observable, measurable behavior; it is instead a subjective experience that each person lives uniquely and that can be understood only by describing the essence of that experience. Through this lens, the study aims to uncover the meaning structures underlying informants' recurrent workplace gestures smiling, holding back irritation, or displaying enthusiasm they may not feel. Evidence was gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation of tour services, and the researcher's reflective notes, together enabling a textural and structural account of the essence of the emotional labor experience. The study is guided by the question: In what ways do tour guides and operational staff at travel agencies in Semarang undergo, interpret, and regulate their emotions while striving to deliver a consistently positive service experience to tourists? In addressing this question, the study aims to (a) describe, rather than merely label, the sources and strategies of emotional labor across two occupational groups rarely compared within the same study, and (b) offer actionable input for travel agencies developing psychological support for frontline employees, thereby contributing to scholarship on emotional labor in tourism SMEs in developing countries.

The Concept of Emotional Labor: Surface Acting, Deep Acting, and Genuine Expression

Hochschild (1983) first introduced the concept of emotional labor in the seminal work The Managed Heart, defining it as the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display performed for a wage, thereby giving that display exchange value. Hochschild distinguished two main strategies: surface acting, which feigns emotional expression without altering internal feeling, and deep acting, which actively modifies internal feeling to align with the expression the role requires. Grandey (2000) extended this account through an emotion-regulation model in which surface acting corresponds to response-focused regulation and deep acting to antecedent-focused regulation. Later theorizing added a third category, genuine expression, in which the emotion displayed already matches the worker's inner state and therefore demands little regulatory effort (Jalilzadeh et al., 2024). A thirty-year meta-analysis confirms that surface acting reliably predicts emotional exhaustion and dissonance, while deep acting shows a more mixed pattern, sometimes raising job satisfaction yet still depleting psychological resources over extended periods (Xu et al., 2020).

This Hochschild-Grandey lineage is not the only lens available for interpreting these findings, and it is worth being explicit about what it does and does not explain. Affective events theory treats workplace emotion as a response to discrete events embedded in the work environment rather than as a stable individual disposition, which helps explain why the same worker may surface act in one encounter and express genuine warmth in the next (Amissah et al., 2022). The JD-R and COR traditions, meanwhile, reframe emotional labor as a job demand that depletes finite psychological resources unless offset by countervailing resources such as managerial or coworker support, service orientation, or emotional intelligence (Abubakar et al., 2022; Lei & Kuok, 2025; Liao et al., 2022; Üngüren et al., 2025). These accounts converge with Hochschild and Grandey's framework on the basic surface/deep distinction but diverge on mechanism: where the original framework emphasizes the effort of regulating emotion to meet a display rule, resource-based accounts emphasize the depletion and replenishment of a worker's capacity to keep performing that regulation over time. The present study retains Hochschild and Grandey's vocabulary because it maps directly onto how informants described their own strategies, but draws on resource-based accounts in the Discussion to interpret why those strategies shift as tenure accumulates.

Emotional Labor in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry: Prior Evidence

Given the fundamentally service-driven character of tourism and hospitality work, this sector has emerged as a particularly fertile setting for investigations into emotional labor. In a two-year qualitative inquiry involving 44 members of a tour guide association in the Australian Outback, Hillman (2023) reported that all three of Hochschild's emotional labor strategies surface acting, deep acting, and genuine expression were routinely employed by tour guides, yet frequently not identified consciously as "emotional labor," being construed instead as a component of tourist "interpretation." For holiday representatives, an antecedent model of emotional labor was formulated by Busoi et al. (2022), who argued that prolonged interaction and the "always on public display" character of the role form a distinctive antecedent separating tourism

emotional labor from that in other service industries. Within hospitality, Leal and Carvalho (2023) demonstrated that distrust in supervision intensifies hotel employees' propensity to perform surface acting while ill (sickness surface acting), markedly elevating emotional exhaustion, while Amissah et al. (2022) similarly linked emotional labor to both emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction among hospitality employees more broadly. Customer incivility was shown by Kim et al. (2025) to amplify the association between emotional labor and emotional exhaustion, which in turn promotes turnover intention among hospitality employees, a pathway corroborated by resource-based studies showing that surface acting increases burnout and work alienation unless buffered by service orientation or managerial support (Üngüren et al., 2025) and by bibliometric evidence that burnout among hotel employees is a multidimensional, theoretically fragmented phenomenon still concentrated in a small number of journals (Lukić Nikolić & Garabinović, 2023). A meta-analytic review of 79 studies on emotion management among hospitality frontline employees similarly concludes that service-workplace emotional experience is shaped by situational cognitive appraisal rather than functioning as an automatic reaction to organizational display rules (Shulga et al., 2024), and a broader meta-review of burnout and "boreout" literature reinforces that psychological outcomes of frontline work depend heavily on job design rather than emotional labor alone (Abubakar et al., 2022).

Investigations specifically addressing travel agency personnel remain scarce; emotional intelligence and job satisfaction were identified by Knežević et al. (2021) as significant predictors of Serbian travel agency staff's inclination to use deep acting instead of surface acting, although that study's quantitative design did not capture how the emotion-regulation process is subjectively experienced. Recent developments further underscore the timeliness of the present study: Kuo et al. (2024) found that emotional labor and job stress significantly affect the job performance of tour leaders in Taiwan, moderated by job characteristics and social media use intensity, while a person-centered longitudinal study of hotel employees by Xiong et al. (2025) confirms that emotional labor strategy profiles change over time and exert differentiated influences on long-term mental health a result pertinent to conceptualizing emotional labor as a process rather than a fixed state, and one echoed by evidence that continued surface acting predicts sustained work-life imbalance and quiet quitting among hospitality employees (Prentice et al., 2024). In Indonesia, Wibawa et al. (2025) found that both emotional labor and workplace incivility influence restaurant workers' psychological well-being through burnout as a mediator, suggesting a more complex, not invariably negative, pattern; Arya et al. (2023) found that emotional dissonance and exhaustion contribute to service sabotage among Jakarta hotel employees, with emotional intelligence acting as a protective factor; and a Semarang-based survey of hotel front office staff found that perceived organizational support shapes emotional labor even in the absence of a written policy (Alifah & Prihastuty, 2025), directly corroborating a pattern this study's informants also described. Taken together, this body of work agrees that surface acting is the more consistently costly strategy and that organizational and personal resources buffer its effects, yet it remains split between viewing emotional labor primarily as an act of regulation (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983) and viewing it primarily as a depletable resource (Abubakar et al., 2022; Lei & Kuok, 2025; Üngüren et al., 2025). Few studies have examined which framing better fits workers in small, resource-constrained tourism enterprises rather than large hotels or airlines a gap the present phenomenological account is positioned to inform descriptively, even though it cannot adjudicate between the two frameworks quantitatively.

Tour Guides and Travel Agency Operational Staff as Emotional Labor Actors

In the emotional labor literature, tour guides form a distinctive occupational category: over lengthy excursions, they must provide information, act as cultural interpreters, and regulate the moods of tourist groups. Alrawadieha and Dincer (2021) found that emotional labor among Turkish guides is closely linked to both quality of working life and life satisfaction; emotional dissonance raises burnout and reduces working-life quality, while emotional effort generates the opposite outcome. Mackenzie and Raymond (2020) proposed a conceptual framework for adventure guide well-being, emphasizing that particular emotional pressures such as soothing tourists during high-risk moments constitute a unique form of psychological pressure that conventional emotional labor scholarship rarely recognizes. In the Indonesian setting, Febrianty et al. (2024) conducted a phenomenological study of Balinese tour guides' emotional labor and found that gender affects how guides interpret and handle the emotional expectations of their jobs, with female guides often bearing an added emotional labor load through the negotiation of personal boundaries with tourists. A systematic review by Pusparani et al. (2025) on guides in the digital age likewise confirms that the affective aspect including emotional labor is one of three principal themes determining the modern value of guide services, alongside technical competence and digital capability, even though scholarship on this aspect remains "underdeveloped" relative to the other two themes. Meanwhile, operational staff in travel agencies the workers who process complaints, cancellations, and crisis coordination from a desk are seldom

made the specific subject of emotional labor research, despite studies of guide competency showing that service staff attitudes strongly shape tourist satisfaction (Trivenna & Eviana, 2024); this implies that the emotion management of travel agency frontline employees warrants comparable academic attention. A recent Turkish study by Solmaz and Göktaş (2024) confirms that emotional labor, especially extended surface acting, is significantly connected to guide burnout in the Şanlıurfa destination, reinforcing a pattern also identified by Alrawadieha and Dincer (2021) among Turkish guides. Additionally, Apriyani's (2025) national phenomenological study of the meaning of hospitality for front office employees at star-rated hotels found that the friendliness frontline staff display arises from continuous negotiation among professional identity, emotional labor demands, and guest relationships a finding methodologically and thematically relevant as a direct comparison for the present study, since both use a phenomenological approach within Indonesian tourism and hospitality services. Consistent with this pattern, a mixed-methods study of tourism employees more broadly finds that job satisfaction mediates, rather than eliminates, the relationship between emotional labor and employee performance (Rajak & Singh, 2023), while an Indonesian hotel study links positive emotion management directly to employee engagement (Maharani et al., 2025) both suggesting that the consequences of emotional labor for tourism workers depend on organizational conditions to which operational staff, no less than guides, are exposed.

Methodological Considerations and Research Gap

The majority of studies on emotional labor in tourism rely on cross-sectional survey designs using standardized emotional labor scales, methodologically well suited to population-level generalization but limited in capturing the interpretive processes participants experience over time (Knežević et al., 2021; Leal & Carvalho, 2023). Phenomenology, as formalized by Moustakas (1994) in the Husserlian tradition, offers an alternative pathway that lets researchers access the essence of experience through textural description (what is experienced) and structural description (how it is lived) without imposing predetermined theoretical categories on the data. Braun and Clarke (2022) stress the importance of researcher reflexivity throughout qualitative coding, an orientation consistent with epoché (bracketing) in the transcendental phenomenological tradition and one this study operationalizes concretely in the Method section below. Qualitative data analysis software such as Atlas.ti has been shown to support code management and audit trails in tourism and hospitality research, strengthening the transparency and traceability of interpretive analysis (Ñañez-Silva et al., 2024). Nonetheless, no phenomenological study has yet directly contrasted the emotional labor experiences of field-based tour guides with those of office-based operational staff within a single travel agency, particularly in a medium-sized Indonesian city such as Semarang. The present study addresses this gap by offering an essence-level description of the emotion management underlying frontline tourism service, and it contributes a specific, testable proposition for future quantitative work: that interaction frequency, not only interaction duration, functions as an antecedent of emotional labor severity.

Method

Research Design and Epistemological Position

This study employs a descriptive-transcendental phenomenological design, developed by Moustakas (1994) within the Husserlian tradition, to delineate the universal essence of a lived experience among individuals who have encountered it directly. This choice rests on an epistemological premise: emotional labor resists comprehensive apprehension through closed-scale measurement alone, since its core lies in the subjective meaning people ascribe to regulating their own emotions. A phenomenological approach was selected because the research question concerns how a phenomenon is experienced rather than the causal relationships among variables (Moustakas, 1994). Before data collection began, the researcher applied the principle of epoché (bracketing) in a concrete, documentable form: a bracketing journal was opened two weeks before fieldwork, in which the researcher recorded prior assumptions and personal experiences related to tourism service work; entries were revisited after each interview and again during coding to flag moments where those prior assumptions appeared to be shaping interpretation, following the audit-trail approach to reflexivity recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). This journal, rather than a one-line disclosure of bracketing, constitutes the auditable record of the bracketing process that underpins the analysis reported in the Results and Discussion.

Participants and Data Collection Procedure

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling using three inclusion criteria: (1) current employment as a licensed tour guide or as operational personnel in a licensed travel agency in Semarang; (2) at least two years of service in that role; and (3) willingness to describe emotional experiences in depth.

Twelve informants met these criteria: seven tour guides (four male, three female) and five operational staff handling reservations, customer service, and tour coordination. These informants were drawn from five of the travel agencies officially registered in Semarang (Pemerintah Kota Semarang, 2024); consistent with the interpretive aims of phenomenological inquiry, this sample is not intended to be statistically representative of all registered agencies in the city, and transferability of the findings to other agencies, cities, or tourism-service types should be assessed by the reader against the contextual detail reported here rather than assumed. Recruitment proceeded iteratively: after each interview the researcher reviewed the emerging code list, and no substantively new first-order codes emerged after the eleventh interview; the twelfth interview was retained to confirm this pattern, a threshold consistent with methodological guidance suggesting phenomenological saturation is typically reached between eight and fifteen informants.

Agencies were contacted sequentially, the code list was reviewed after each interview, and recruitment was stopped when saturation was reached after five agencies had contributed twelve informants. The remaining 38 agencies were therefore not excluded arbitrarily: some did not meet the design requirements (they did not run guided tours or did not employ both groups), some declined to participate, and the rest were no longer needed. The informants comprised seven tour guides (four men, three women; code PW) and five operational staff (four men, one woman; code SO) seven had less than five years of tenure and the other five had five years or more. This sample is not intended to be statistically representative of all agencies

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of five blocks: (1) the work context; (2) emotionally demanding encounters ("Tell me about a time when you had to keep smiling even though you felt tired or annoyed"); (3) the in-the-moment regulation of emotions; (4) impact and recovery ("How do you feel after finishing an emotionally stressful workday?"); and (5) the meaning assigned to work. Within each block, one principal question was complemented by non-directive probing questions, while theoretical terms, such as surface acting, were omitted. The guide underwent review by two experienced lecturers and preliminary testing via two pilot interviews conducted outside the sample. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in Indonesian over approximately ten weeks of fieldwork; they averaged 30–45 minutes, were recorded once informants' consent had been secured, and were transcribed verbatim. Secondary data came from participant observation of eight tour service sessions and service-counter interactions, during which the researcher documented nonverbal cues, vocal tone, and interaction patterns between staff and tourists. Field notes and a reflective journal were maintained throughout data collection to support continuous bracketing.

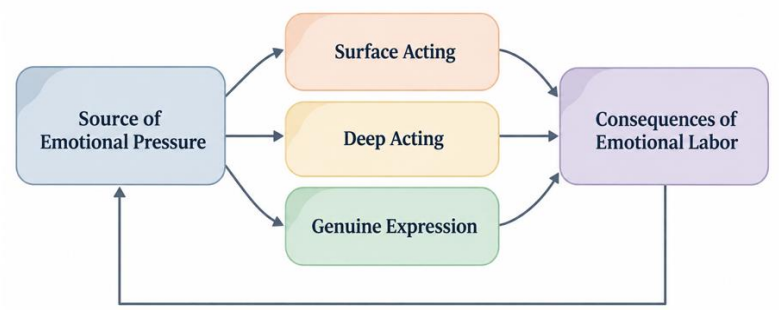


Figure 1. Conceptual research framework: phenomenology of emotional labor based on Hochschild (1983) and Grandey (2000)

Conceptual Research Framework

Figure 1 displays the conceptual framework of the study, showing how the emotional labor experienced by informants emerges from the interplay among organizational display rules, the nature of tourist interactions, and individual psychological resources. These elements are subsequently interpreted through surface acting, deep acting, or genuine expression, producing outcomes that include emotional exhaustion and the meaning attached to work. As an initial sensitizing map, this framework does not restrict the researcher; instead, it guides analytical focus throughout phenomenological reduction.

Analytical Framework: Hochschild and Grandey's Emotional Labor Theory

Even though phenomenological inquiry prioritizes description free of theoretical imposition during data collection, Grandey (2000) and Hochschild's (1983) conceptual frameworks functioned as a sensitizing lens that oriented analytical focus during phenomenological reduction and, in the final interpretive phase, allowing the essential findings to be placed in dialogue with existing scholarship. Surface acting, deep acting, and genuine expression operated as orienting categories rather than a fixed coding template established in advance, so that themes emerging emically from the data could still be presented authentically.

Data Analysis: Phenomenological Analysis

Analysis followed the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological method outlined by Moustakas (1994), through the following stages: first, horizonalization each significant transcript statement related to emotional labor was catalogued without disproportionately weighting any single statement; second, horizons were reduced into non-overlapping meaning units; third, those units were grouped into thematic clusters; fourth, a textural description was constructed to capture what informants experienced; fifth, a structural description was developed to explain how context and conditions shaped that experience; and sixth, an essential description was synthesized by integrating the textural and structural dimensions. Braun and Clarke (2022) were also consulted as an additional source on reflexivity in qualitative coding. To assess the consistency of this coding process, a second member of the research team independently open-coded four of the twelve transcripts (33%) before comparing codebooks with the primary researcher; percentage agreement across first-order codes was 87%, and disagreements were resolved through discussion and used to refine the codebook before the remaining transcripts were coded. Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software supported the entire coding process, enabling the researcher to construct a code network, visualize thematic relationships, and maintain a systematic coding audit trail a practice shown to strengthen transparency and traceability in qualitative data analysis within tourism and hospitality research (Ñañez-Silva et al., 2024). Epoché was maintained continuously through reflective memoing in Atlas.ti whenever the researcher detected possible interpretive bias.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Consistent with a contemporary phenomenological framework, the trustworthiness of this investigation was safeguarded through the four criteria advanced by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was secured by triangulating multiple data sources interviews, observations, and field notes by the independent double-coding exercise reported above, and by member checking, in which a summary of the essential description and illustrative quotations was returned to four informants; all four confirmed that the summary reflected their experience, and two suggested minor wording clarifications that were incorporated into the final description. Transferability was facilitated through a thick description of the case context specifically, the travel agency with an explicit statement of the sample's limits noted above. Dependability was upheld through a coding audit trail in Atlas.ti, wherein each interpretive decision was documented, and through peer debriefing sessions held with two qualitative-research colleagues at the midpoint and end of coding to challenge emerging interpretations. Confirmability was established through the reflexive bracketing journal described above, which kept the researcher's interpretations distinct from informants' verbatim statements. Written informed consent was secured from every informant; informant identities and travel agency names were anonymized in the reporting; and informants were permitted to end the interview or withdraw their statements at any time, without consequence. Comparative literature is engaged interpretationmainly in the Discussion section that follows the Results; within the Results, references to prior studies are kept brief and serve only to situate each descriptive finding, so that theoretical interpretation remains minimal, consistent with the separation of description and interpretation that phenomenological reporting conventions recommend (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Results and Discussions

Context and Characteristics of Informants

The twelve informants participating in this study possessed professional experience spanning two to eighteen years, with eight of the twelve being employed by small- and medium-sized travel agencies that offered domestic, pilgrimage/religious, and MICE tour packages within Semarang and its surrounding areas. The seven tour guides routinely escorted tours lasting between one and five days, whereas the five operational staff members managed an average of 15–40 customer interactions daily through telephone, instant messaging, and face-to-face encounters. All informants reported that "excellent service" was implicitly construed by the organization as an obligation to continuously display friendliness and patience, despite the fact that no travel agency possessed a written guideline concerning work-related emotion management. This finding aligns with the observation that formal institutional support for the emotional well-being of SME tourism workers in Indonesia continues to be limited (Pusparani et al., 2025).

Theme I: Sources of Emotional Pressure in Delivering Excellent Service

A phenomenological examination of twelve interview transcripts uncovered five principal categories of emotional pressure, which are summarized in Table 1. Every informant (12 of 12) identified the requirements of organizational display rules as an intrinsic experience and as something never formally instructed,

although universally understood (Informant PW-3, tour guide). This result strengthens (Hochschild, 1983) notion of implicit display rules and corresponds to (Busoi et al., 2022), whose study reported that tour representatives perceive the expectation to maintain a positive public image as an unspoken occupational burden that is not formally stipulated in their employment agreement. No informant mentioned training, documents, or specific supervision as the source of these rules; one informant linked their compliance to the possibility of tourists complaining to the office (Informant PW-1; see Theme II).

Table 1. Origins of emotional pressure among tour guides and travel agency operational staff

Category of emotional pressure	Coding criteria	Representative situation	Informant group	Data example (informant code)	Frequency (n = 12)
Implicit organizational display rules	Statements about organizational expectations regarding emotional expression not set out in documents, training, or written instructions	No written SOP, yet the expectation to smile and stay patient is understood as an unspoken obligation	All informants (PW and SO)	PW-3: demands never formally instructed but understood by everyone; PW-1: worried guests will "complain to the office"	12 (100%)
Unpredictable tourist/customer behavior	Statements about unanticipated emotional reactions of tourists or clients that demand an immediate response	Sudden complaints, anger over delays, requests beyond the scope of the service package	PW and SO; PW: continuous throughout the tour; SO: brief but recurring throughout the workday	SO-2: client suddenly angry when the schedule changed, although it was not the staff member's fault	11 (91.7%)
Time pressure and emotional multitasking	Statements about having to serve several parties at once with different tones and emotional needs	Serving several tourists/clients at once with different tones and needs	PW and SO; more prominent in SO accounts	SO accounts of handling telephone, instant messaging, and face-to-face contact simultaneously	9 (75%)
Tension between personal identity and professional role	Statements about concealing personal states (sadness, fatigue, household problems) for the sake of tourists' mood	Concealing sadness, physical fatigue, or personal problems to stay enthusiastic	PW and SO	PW-6: continued guiding a tour shortly after a parent's death; PW-4: "like having two different selves"	8 (66.7%)
Lack of support from coworkers/supervisors during emotional crises	Statements about the absence of mechanisms for sharing experiences or debriefing after difficult incidents	No mechanism for sharing experiences or debriefing after difficult incidents	Distribution by group not specified; example from SO	SO-5: employees work on their own and no one asks how they are after handling a difficult client	7 (58.3%)

The second source, unpredictable tourist behavior (11 of 12 informants; 91.7%), affected tour guides and operational staff in distinct ways. Tour guides encountered this pressure directly and persistently throughout the entire tour, whereas operational staff experienced it through briefer yet more recurrent interactions during the working day. This pattern mirrors (Kim et al., 2025) observation that customer incivility heightens the emotional demands placed on frontline tourism and hospitality employees. One operational staff member explained that clients may become suddenly angry when schedules change, even though this is not the staff member's fault, yet employees are expected to suppress irritation and continue offering polite affirmations despite inner distress (Informant SO-2, operational staff). The fourth source, a conflict between personal identity and role expectations, was especially evident among eight of the twelve informants, who reported concealing sorrow, physical fatigue, or domestic difficulties in order to protect tourists' mood. This finding

echoes the concept of sickness surface acting identified by (Leal & Carvalho, 2023) among hotel employees. The same tension between personal identity and professional role appeared in a tour guide's account of continuing a pre-booked tour shortly after a parent's death, smiling before guests and weeping only when alone (Informant PW-6, tour guide).

The third and fifth sources of pressure in Table 1 were also detected in the data, although with relatively lower frequency than the first two sources. Time pressure and emotional multitasking, namely the need to serve several tourists or clients simultaneously with differing tones and needs, were reported by nine of the twelve respondents (75%). These were more prominent among operational staff who handle multiple communication channels telephone, instant messaging, and face-to-face interaction at the same time throughout the workday. Meanwhile, insufficient support from coworkers or supervisors during emotional crises was reported by seven of the twelve respondents (58.3%). They emphasized the absence of a mechanism for sharing experiences or conducting formal debriefing after difficult incidents, which they viewed as a structural deficiency in their organizations. Another operational staff member described this situation by noting that employees work independently and no one asks whether they are all right after handling a difficult client; sometimes they wish to discuss it with a colleague, but everyone is occupied with their own duties (Informant SO-5, operational staff).

Theme II: Emotion Management Strategies - Surface Acting, Deep Acting, and Genuine Expression

An additional examination indicates that informants occupy shifting positions across three approaches to emotion management, as shown in Table 2. Those with less than five years of work experience more often described relying on surface acting, especially during intense conflicts, such as when tourists voiced emotional complaints. In contrast, respondents with greater tenure described progressing toward deep acting; that is, they deliberately persuaded themselves that a challenging circumstance constituted an ordinary aspect of the role before ultimately responding with composure. Consistent with (Hillman, 2023), this movement from surface acting to deep acting and genuine expression seems to be associated with how experienced and skilled tour guides are in interpreting and addressing tourists' emotional requirements. One participant illustrated surface acting as follows: "I'm actually really tired, but I force myself to smile anyway, because if I look tired the guests get uncomfortable and complain to the office" (Informant PW-1, tour guide). The movement toward deep acting, however, is apparent in the next remark: "I usually tell myself, 'this is just part of the job, it's normal for guests to ask the same thing over and over,' so eventually I really do feel calm it's no longer forced" (Informant PW-5, tour guide).

Table 2. Emotion management strategies and their triggering contexts

Strategy	Description	Common Triggering Context	Dominant Informant Group
Surface Acting	Displaying friendly expressions without changing internal feelings	Acute conflict, sudden complaints, interactions with unfamiliar people	Tenure < 5 years (group n = 7)
Deep Acting	Cognitively convincing oneself to genuinely feel calm/friendly	Recurring situations, medium- to long-term working relationships	Tenure ≥ 5 years (group n = 5)
Genuine Expression	Friendliness that arises genuinely, aligned with personal feelings	Interactions with responsive and appreciative tourists/clients	Strong personal attachment to the profession (3 of 12)

Note: The strategy categories are not mutually exclusive across individuals an informant may report more than one strategy depending on the interaction context encountered. The n values in the surface acting and deep acting rows are the sizes of the tenure groups in which the strategy was most prominent, not the number of users; only genuine expression is counted per informant.

Notably, a modest minority of participants three out of twelve especially those who felt a strong personal attachment to tour guiding, described genuine expression. This refers to a state in which the warmth they demonstrated corresponded genuinely with their own emotions, particularly while engaging with tourists who were responsive to and appreciative of the service delivered. Such a finding deepens (Jalilzadeh et al., 2024) comprehension of the situation in which emotional labor ceases to be experienced as "work" and instead becomes an authentic mode of self-expression. One participant explained this genuine expression thus: "When the guests are fun, responsive, curious, and appreciative, I'm genuinely happy it's not an act, it really comes from the heart" (Informant PW-7, tour guide).

Theme III: Impact of Emotional Labor on Psychological Well-Being and Meaning of Work

Table 3 presents the third theme, through which the ramifications of emotional labor as undergone by the informants are disclosed. Among the twelve informants, post-work emotional exhaustion was documented in ten cases; this condition was verbalized as feeling "empty," "emotionally drained," or "needing time

alone" once a tour or emotionally taxing shift had concluded. Meta-analytic conclusions whereby surface acting has been consistently correlated with emotional exhaustion are consonant with this pattern (Xu et al., 2020). The following account of post-work emotional exhaustion was provided by an operational staff member: "After getting home from work, I usually just stay quiet in my room I don't want to talk to anyone yet. It feels like my battery is completely drained" (Informant SO-1, operational staff). Emotional dissonance was likewise reported by a tour guide: "In front of guests I have to be cheerful, even though inside I'm upset about problems at home. It's exhausting, like having two different selves" (Informant PW-4, tour guide).

Table 3. Impacts of emotional labor and accompanying coping strategies

Impact	Description of Experience	Accompanying Coping Strategy	Interview Frequency (n=12)
Post-work emotional exhaustion	Feeling "empty," needing time alone, difficulty socializing after a shift/tour	Solitary rest, temporarily avoiding social interaction	10 (83.3%)
Emotional dissonance	Inner conflict between felt and displayed emotions	Personal journaling, confiding in family/close friends	8 (66.7%)
Satisfaction and meaning of work	Feeling appreciated and proud when tourists/clients are satisfied and express gratitude	Turning positive moments into work motivation	7 (58.3%)
Pressure on personal relationships outside work	Emotional fatigue carried home, affecting family relationships	Open communication with partner/family	5 (41.7%)

The interconnections between the three themes, twelve categories and the patterns of co-occurrence between categories identified during the coding process are visualised using the Network View feature in Atlas.ti Network View (Figure 2) and formed the basis for synthesizing the essential description.

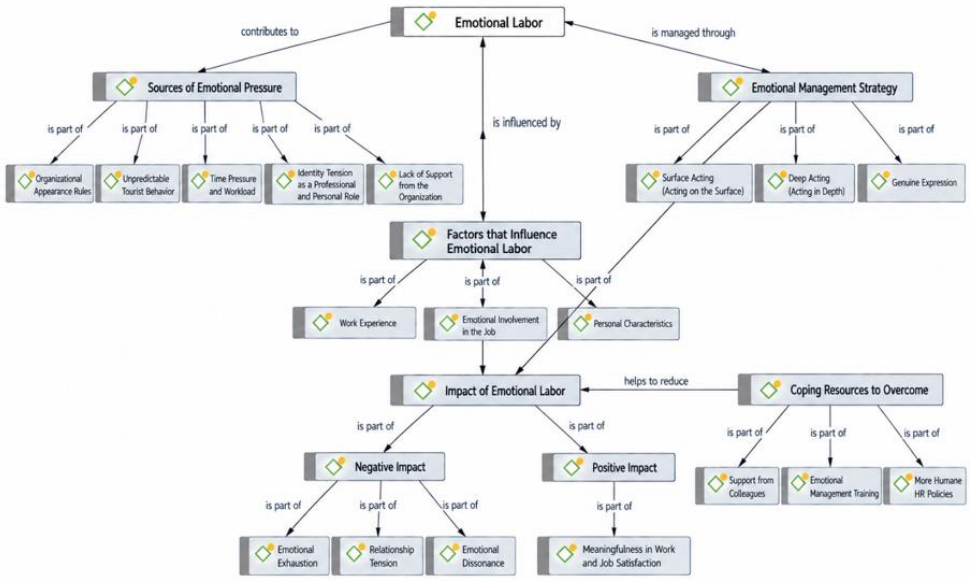


Figure 2. Code network (network view) from the Atlas.ti analysis: interrelationships among themes, categories, and emotion management strategies

Notwithstanding these exhaustion accounts, deep satisfaction and meaning in work were also reported by seven of the twelve informants, especially those whose orientation favored deep acting and genuine expression; this was particularly noted when appreciation was directly expressed by tourists or clients. Because ten informants reported exhaustion and seven reported meaningful work, at least five informants necessarily described both. Such ambivalence exhaustion accompanied by meaningfulness emphasizes the "double-edged sword" quality of emotional labor identified in (Grandey, 2000) framework. It also strengthens the conclusions of a meta-analysis concerning hospitality frontline emotion management, in which the emotional outcomes of service workers are demonstrated to depend substantially on situational cognitive appraisal rather than exclusively on the nature of the performed job (Shulga et al., 2024). The following statement illustrates this satisfaction and meaning: "When a guest says, 'thank you, that was one

of the best tours we've had,' it feels like all the exhaustion was worth it. That's what keeps me in this job" (Informant PW-2, tour guide).

The three themes constitute three essences of the experience: texturally reflected in informants' accounts (Tables 1–3), and structurally in distinct temporal characteristics, namely sustained demands for guides and brief, recurring, and simultaneous demands for operational staff. On the whole, the emotional labor experience as lived by Semarang tour guides and travel agency operational staff can be encapsulated as the art of reconciling personal emotional honesty with demands for professional excellence, achieved through strategy repertoires that are altered by experience, interaction context, and the psychological resources available to the individual.

Overall, it constitutes a stratified and evolving experience that shifts along a continuum encompassing surface acting, deep acting, and genuine expression, as theorized by Grandey (2000) and Hochschild (1983). From the perspective of Conservation of Resources theory, the shift in emotion-regulation strategy associated with growing work tenure can be read as an adaptive mechanism: workers accumulate psychological resources cognitive frames, self-regulatory capacity, and social support that make a gradual move away from resource-draining surface acting toward more sustainable deep acting and, for a minority, genuine expression, consistent with the pattern Hillman (2023) documented among Australian tour guides and with recent evidence that managerial and personal resources buffer the burnout costs of surface acting more broadly (Lei & Kuok, 2025; Üngüren et al., 2025).

This tenure-based reading is the most parsimonious account of the pattern observed in this sample, but it is not the only one consistent with the data, and the cross-sectional, retrospective design of this study cannot fully adjudicate among them. A role-socialization account would attribute the shift not to accumulating psychological resources but to newcomers gradually internalizing the occupational script for what counts as acceptable emotional display, regardless of whether their underlying resources have changed. A cohort account would attribute part of the pattern to systematic differences between informants who entered tour guiding at different points in the sector's recovery, rather than to a within-person developmental process. A selection account would note that workers who found surface acting unsustainable may simply have left the profession before reaching five years of tenure, so that the more experienced informants in this sample are a survivor group rather than evidence that surface acting reliably matures into deep acting for everyone who tries the job. Recent theoretical work on Conservation of Resources theory cautions that gain-and-loss cycles are frequently inferred from cross-sectional data in ways the theory does not strictly license, and recommends longitudinal or within-person designs to test them properly (Liao et al., 2022). Longitudinal evidence from the hotel sector shows that emotional labor strategy profiles do shift over time within the same individuals and carry different long-term mental-health consequences (Xiong et al., 2025), which lends some support to the developmental reading adopted here, but a longitudinal design within tour guiding and travel agency work specifically would be needed to rule out the socialization, cohort, and selection alternatives with more confidence.

These results also surface several conceptual tensions. First, the display rules encountered by participants remain tacit rather than formally codified, imposing an added interpretive demand: employees must infer the organization's definition of good service rather than follow explicit instruction. This situation echoes Pusparani et al.'s (2025) observation that, in current discussions of tour guide professionalization, the affective dimensions of guides' work continue to receive less structured attention than technical and digital competence, and it is consistent with survey evidence that perceived organizational support shapes how front-line hospitality staff experience emotional labor even when no written policy exists (Alifah & Prihastuty, 2025).

Second, this research indicates that travel agency operational staff who have traditionally attracted less scholarly attention than field-based tour guides in fact bear a substantial emotional burden, though its configuration differs: their interactions are shorter but occur far more often across the working day. Rather than treating this as a settled equivalence, it is more accurate to describe operational staff and tour guides as experiencing emotional labor with different temporal signatures: guides encounter sustained emotional demand across a single extended encounter, whereas operational staff encounter recurrent, discrete emotional demand across many brief encounters within a shift. This broadens Busoi et al.'s (2022) antecedent model for holiday representatives, which emphasizes lengthy interaction duration, by suggesting that brief yet recurring interactions can likewise constitute a meaningful antecedent of emotional labor, especially when they involve customer complaints or incivility (Kim et al., 2025), and it aligns with resource-based accounts in which the cumulative frequency of demanding events, not only their duration, depletes psychological resources over a shift (Amissah et al., 2022; Lei & Kuok, 2025). A quantitative test using

validated emotional labor and exhaustion scales, administered separately to guides and operational staff and controlling for interaction frequency and duration, would be needed to confirm this temporal-signature distinction beyond the descriptive comparison offered here.

So that the between-group comparison does not rest solely on narrative inference, emotional load was defined as the magnitude of emotion management demands per unit of working time across six measurable dimensions (Table 4), following the demand facets of the ELS (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003) and Grandey's (2000) model.

Table 4. Operational definitions and metrics of emotional load by occupational group

Dimension	Operational definition	Metric	Tour guides (n = 7)	Operational staff (n = 5)	Data status
Exposure frequency	Number of service encounters with tourists or clients in one workday	Interactions per day	Not measured (sustained group contact)	15–40	Informant report
Exposure duration	Length of sustained contact within one service episode	Days per tour; minutes per interaction	1–5 days per tour	Not measured (brief interactions)	Informant report
Simultaneity	Number of channels or parties served at the same time	Number of simultaneous channels	Not measured	Up to 3 channels (telephone, instant messaging, face-to-face)	Informant report
Intensity	Number of negatively charged events (complaints, anger) per day or per tour	Events per day or per tour	Not measured	Not measured	Recommended: event diary
Breadth of pressure sources	Number of Table 1 categories reported by an informant	Score 0–5 per informant	Not yet calculated per group	Not yet calculated per group	Can be calculated from the Atlas.ti code–document table
Impact	Reporting of post-work emotional exhaustion	Proportion of informants	10 of 12 for both groups combined	Not yet disaggregated by group	Table 3

Table 4 shows that the available data permit only a comparison of configuration, not magnitude, because no dimension has yet been measured with the same metric for both groups. Breadth of pressure sources and impact can be calculated per group from the Atlas.ti data, whereas a comparison of magnitude requires an event diary at the quantitative stage.

Third, reports of genuine expression among several informants confirm that emotional labor is not invariably repressive. Where personal values and professional role expectations closely align also noted among tour guides in Bali (Febrianty et al., 2024) and among hotel employees whose engagement is linked to positive emotion management (Maharani et al., 2025) emotional labor can become a source of work meaningfulness rather than solely a psychological pressure. This nuances scholarship that chiefly emphasizes emotional labor's adverse dimensions, including exhaustion and burnout (Leal & Carvalho, 2023; Lukić Nikolić & Garabinović, 2023; Xu et al., 2020), by indicating that lived emotional labor is more varied than fixed-response survey instruments typically reveal, and it is consistent with mixed-methods evidence that job satisfaction, rather than emotional labor strategy alone, mediates tourism employees' performance outcomes (Rajak & Singh, 2023).

Institutionally, the absence of written emotion-management guidance at every travel agency examined here reveals a mismatch between the actual demands of emotional work and existing human resource systems, consistent with broader evidence that tourism SMEs in developing countries face structural constrains in building comprehensive HR policy (Hermawati & Sembhodo, 2024). Theoretically, this study's contribution is threefold: it extends Hochschild and Grandey's surface/deep/genuine typology to a previously uncompared occupational pairing within the same organizations; it offers descriptive, phenomenologically grounded evidence for a frequency-based (rather than purely duration-based) antecedent of emotional labor, extending Busoi et al.'s (2022) framework; and it identifies genuine expression, alongside deep acting, as a marker worth greater attention in resource-based accounts of sustainable emotion regulation

(Abubakar et al., 2022; Üngüren et al., 2025). These theoretical contributions are conceptually distinct from the study's practical recommendations, discussed in the Conclusion below, which follow from but do not themselves constitute the theoretical contribution. Empirically, the study helps broaden a tourism emotional labor literature shaped largely by quantitative research in large hotel settings (Knežević et al., 2021; Shulga et al., 2024) by providing a phenomenologically grounded essence-description situated within SME-scale Indonesian travel agencies, filling a research gap concerning office-based operational staff whose experience has received less attention than that of field-based tour guides.

Conclusions

This study examined the emotional labor phenomenon encountered by tour guides and travel agency operational personnel in Semarang through a descriptive-transcendental phenomenological approach. The analysis yielded three experiential essences: (1) sources of emotional pressure traced to implicit organizational display rules, unpredictable tourist conduct, time pressure and emotional multitasking, tension between personal and professional identity, and limited support from coworkers or supervisors; (2) emotion management strategies that moved dynamically across surface acting, deep acting, and genuine expression as occupational experience accumulated; and (3) an ambivalent outcome combining emotional depletion with a sense of work as meaningful. Theoretically, the study's contribution lies in extending established emotional labor categories to a previously uncompared pairing of field-based and office-based tourism workers, in proposing interaction frequency as a candidate antecedent of emotional labor alongside interaction duration, and in foregrounding genuine expression as a strategy meriting closer attention within resource-based (JD-R/COR) accounts of sustainable emotion regulation. These contributions are conceptually separate from the study's practical implications: emotional labor functions as a concealed work competency that merits explicit organizational acknowledgment rather than remaining an implicit burden placed on individual employees. Practically, travel agencies are encouraged to develop emotion-management training, create forums where frontline workers can share experiences, and adopt scheduling or rotation practices that allow psychological recovery after emotionally demanding tours or shifts. In this way, the study contributes to a growing body of knowledge on the human dimension of tourism service, particularly within tourism SMEs in developing countries, where formal institutional support for workers' emotional well-being remains largely absent. Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The study drew on a small, purposively selected sample of twelve informants from five travel agencies in a single city (Semarang), with fieldwork conducted over approximately ten weeks; this conpressures the transferability of the findings to other geographic settings, tourism-service types, and organizational sizes. The phenomenological approach, which prioritizes the depth of individual experience, is inherently unsuited to statistical generalization, and the cross-sectional, retrospective nature of the interviews may introduce recall bias regarding past emotional experiences. As discussed above, the design also cannot fully separate a developmental (tenure-based) account of strategy change from role-socialization, cohort, and selection alternatives; longitudinal or experience-sampling data would be needed to do so. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal designs or the experience sampling method to capture emotional labor's real-time dynamics across a tour's duration and across a shift for operational staff, directly testing the developmental, socialization, cohort, and selection accounts discussed above (Liao et al., 2022; Xiong et al., 2025); to compare emotional labor experiences across cities and tourism-service types (leisure vs. MICE vs. religious tourism); to quantitatively test interaction frequency as an antecedent of emotional labor alongside interaction duration, extending Busoi et al.'s (2022) framework; and to examine more closely the roles of gender and organizational social support, building on Febrianty et al. (2024) in the Bali context.

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